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15¢

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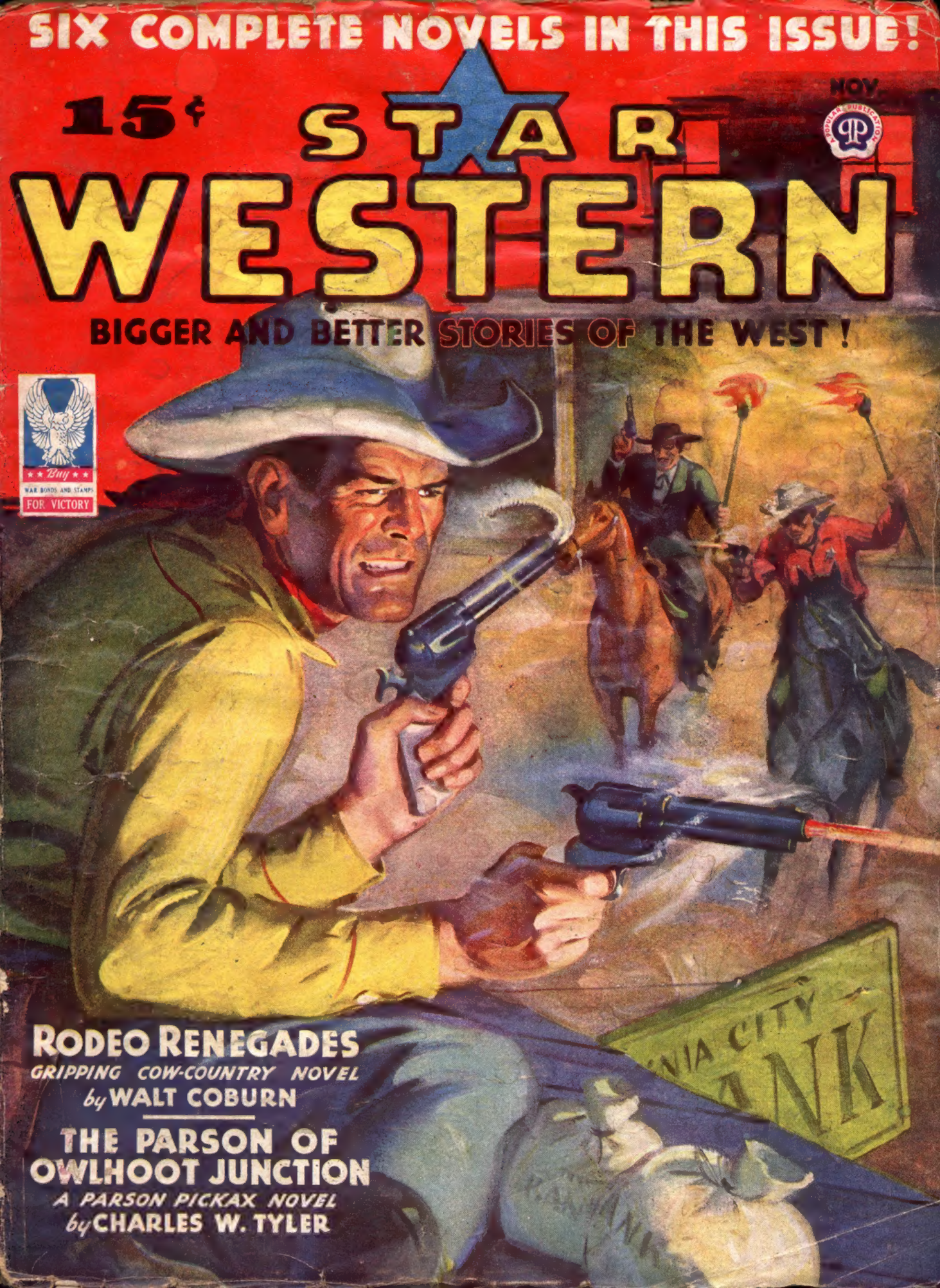

RODEO RENEGADES

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by WALT COBURN

THE PARSON OF OWLHOOT JUNCTION

A PARSON PICKAX NOVEL

by CHARLES W. TYLER

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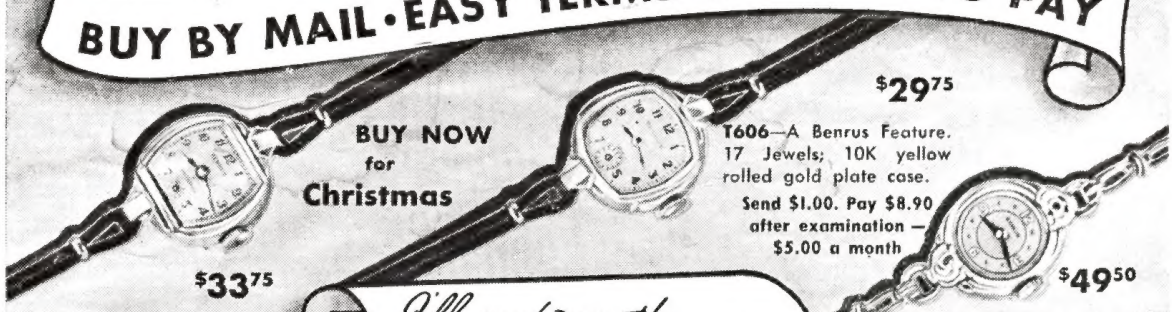

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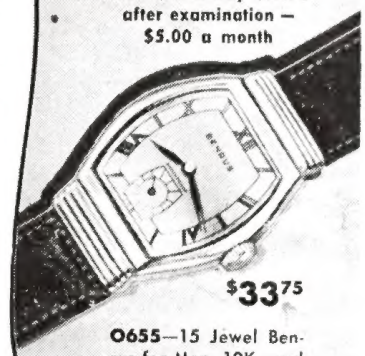

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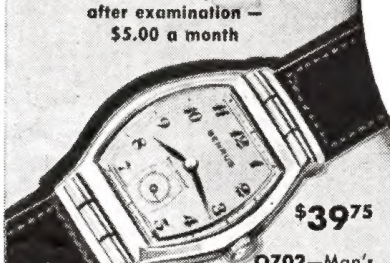

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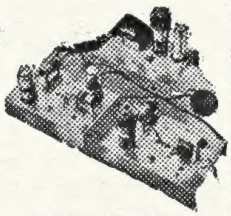

You build this SUPERHETERODYNE CIRCUIT containing a preselector oscillator-mixer-first detector, i.f. stage, diode-detector-a.v.c. stage and audio stage. It will bring in local and distant stations. Get the thrill of learning at home evenings in spare time while you put the set through fascinating tests!

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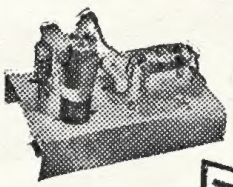

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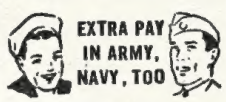

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STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-ONE NOVEMBER, 1943 NUMBER TWO

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

RODEO RENEGADES.....*WALT COBURN* 8

A tough pair to beat in any rodeo arena were those two team-tiers, Never Swett and Ramon Rivers, until a red-headed girl and cut ketch-rope brought to that partnership a third member called—Murder!

HOSS GREER—BONANZA BUSTER!.....*HARRY F. OLMSTED* 24

That wily old cattle-king smelled a rat when the greenhorn land-agent bid up Hoss' forgotten range at the rate of ten thousand dollars a minute—but how could old Hoss tell that final payment would be in Sam Colt's own lead coin?

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Dale Langtry, two-bit rancher, wanted no part in that grim game of "Shoot first—live longest", but a sneaking dry-gulch killer decided to teach Dale its deadly technique, in the toughest range-war the wild Llano country ever saw!

DUKE BAGLEY DEALS IN DEATH!.....*WILLIAM R. COX* 66

When the Duke took the twisted trail after his stolen poker winnings, he was already destined to play a leading part in a bloody Sonora revolution, where not only his gold, but his life would be forfeit.

LAWLESS LAW HITS SAN GABRIEL.....*TOM ROAN* 86

As pardner of the Red Cliff Kid, Pancho had a smooth hand with a guitar, and an eye for a señorita, but when the Kid was accused of stealing that eighty thousand dollar stake, Pancho cultivated a quick trigger-finger to try for that fabulous fortune!

THE PARSON OF OWLHOOT JUNCTION....*CHARLES W. TYLER* 106

The famous Parson Pickax might be able to make a decent, quiet town out of roaring Owlhoot Junction—if Big George and his gun-toughs didn't first make a decent, quiet corpse out of the Parson!

★ ★ Star Features ★ ★

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Where good talk and some ring-tailed augurments bring back the flavor of the frontier.

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A question—and an answer!

DECEMBER ISSUE OUT NOVEMBER 10th!

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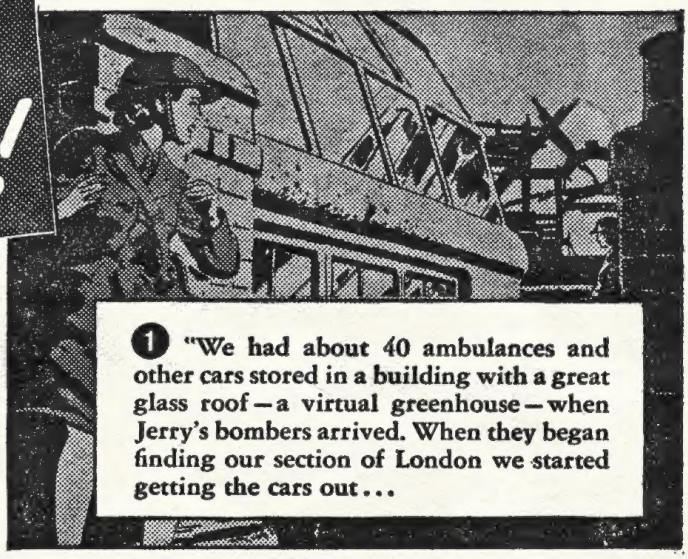
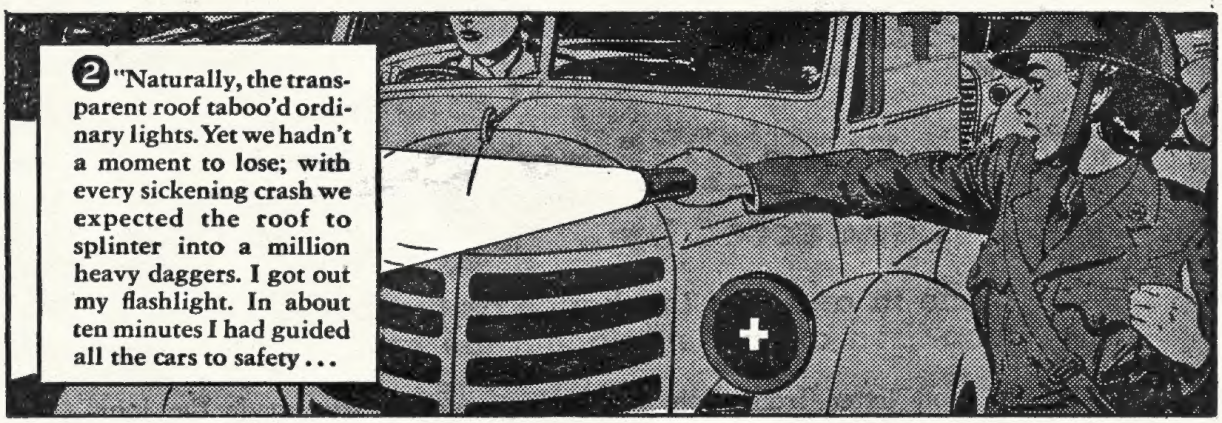
BLITZED IN A GREENHOUSE!

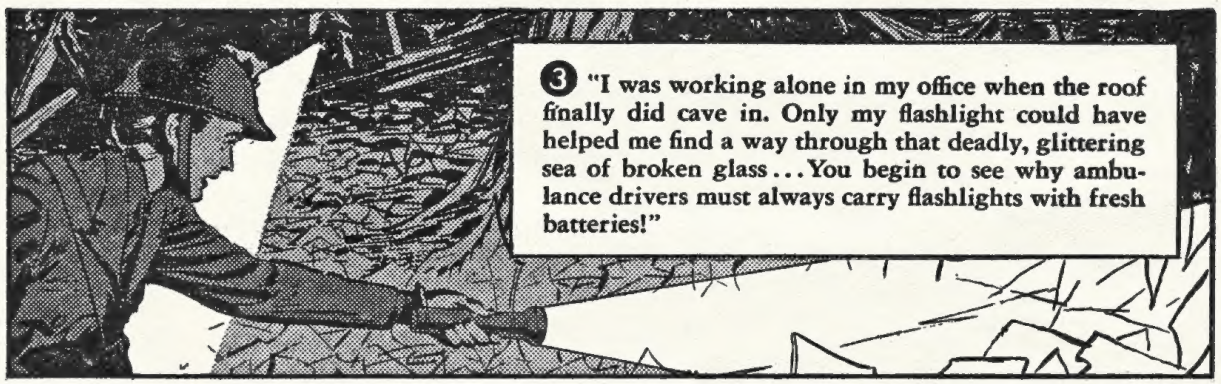
(The exciting experience of Margaret Bridges, of the London Auxiliary Ambulance service, during one of London's heaviest raids. Pretty, attractive 30-year-old Miss Bridges is part English, part American. She volunteered for the ambulance service, reporting for duty just three days before war was declared.)



❶ "We had about 40 ambulances and other cars stored in a building with a great glass roof—a virtual greenhouse—when Jerry's bombers arrived. When they began finding our section of London we started getting the cars out...



❷ "Naturally, the transparent roof taboo'd ordinary lights. Yet we hadn't a moment to lose; with every sickening crash we expected the roof to splinter into a million heavy daggers. I got out my flashlight. In about ten minutes I had guided all the cars to safety...



❸ "I was working alone in my office when the roof finally did cave in. Only my flashlight could have helped me find a way through that deadly, glittering sea of broken glass...You begin to see why ambulance drivers must always carry flashlights with fresh batteries!"

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Conducted by Strawboss

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HERE'S a good letter from Bob O'Shea, of Indianapolis, recounting his version of another cow-country feud yet one that was unique in that it didn't follow the usual pattern of populating the local boothills. We wonder if any of Branding Crew around the Corral have heard any other versions of this story about one of the most famous figures in the history of the cattle-country?

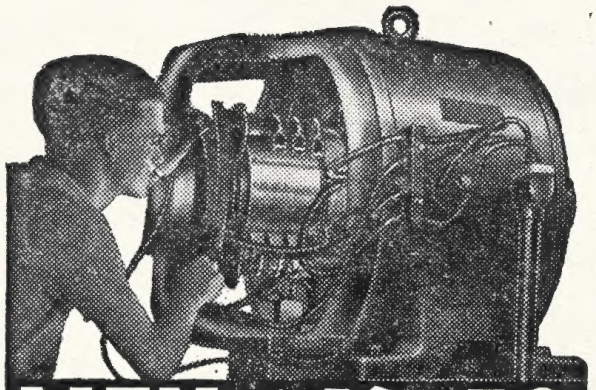
Dear Strawboss:

I wonder how many of the gang know about the famous "legal rustle" that was committed against one of the genuine cattle-kings of the old West—John Chisum? I heard my grandfather, a long-ago resident of Dodge City tell it often. He always claimed that he had a friend who made the ride down to the Pecos country with R. D. Hunter, and his men to accomplish that "raid" against the King of the Pecos. Though I have always suspected that my grandfather was, actually, one of the hard-bitten gun-toters who made the journey himself.

"Uncle John" Chisum, like many another cowman, migrated from Texas to New Mexico, seeking to spread out and find new grazing for his herds. There, first at Bosque Grande, and then at his great ranch-house at South Spring, he established his famous Jingle-Bob mark and Long Rail brand. Able and courageous, and gifted with as colorful a cowman's vocabulary as ever made a mule blush, John Chisum was, above all, a builder. Here, on these rich New Mexico ranges, he brought an increasing number of longhorns from Texas, across the Staked Plains, onto his vast domain.

Time was precious, and to facilitate his gathering cattle on the open range, he wisely got power of attorney from the ranchers from whom he wanted to buy, thus enabling him and his crew to incorporate the other brands into his

(Continued on page 127)



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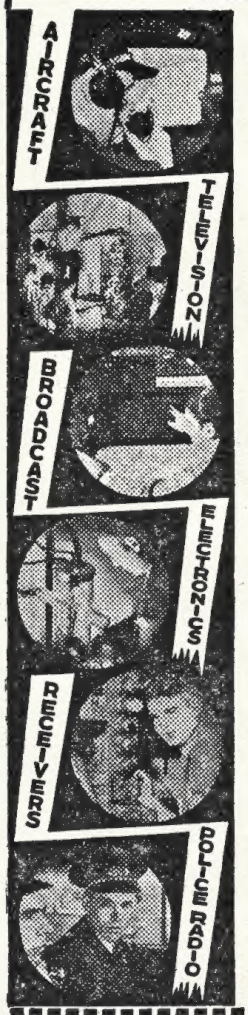

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CITY STATE

RODEO RENEGADES

Smashing Novel of Arizona Cowmen

By Walt Coburn

Though there was no more bitter—or more mysterious—feud on any range than that of Never Swett and Ramon Rivers, champion team-tiers, they never let it interfere with their rodeo work .... Until Never Swett tried to loop a little red-headed trick rider, and found, instead, that he'd roped—Murder!

CHAPTER ONE

Blood in the Arena

IT WAS late afternoon of the Fourth of July, the final day of the Prescott, Arizona, Frontier Days rodeo. The heavy black clouds that had piled up into the hot blue sky from behind old Thumb Butte now dropped their load of rain in a heavy deluge. Lightning struck a giant old pine behind the packed grandstand and

Never Swett's catch-rope had broken on the last steer. . . .

the frightened shrieks of women were blotted out by the ear-splitting crash of thunder.

Up in the judge's stand over the bucking chutes big old Dad Jackson grinned slowly at the new yellow saddle slicker one of the timers shoved at him and shook his head.

"Taken the rain a long time to git here," he spoke, his voice a soft, lazy growl. "I'd hate to miss a drop of it."

He leaned out from under the roof, both big hands gripping the edge of the belt-high stand, his hat pulled down on his shaggy iron gray head, to let the wind drive the heavy rain into his weather-stained face.

His legs braced, water pouring in a tiny river from his slanted hatbrim, he let the wind driven rain soak his gray flannel shirt and his best suit of town clothes. The rain was breaking a drouth that had lasted almost too long.

There was something symbolic about this big, soft-spoken cowman who might have been a statue chiseled out of the gray granite of those Arizona mountains. Sheeped out and fenced out by nesters in Montana, Dad Jackson had drifted to Arizona to gamble what remained of his wealth against the heavy odds the cattleman faces every hour and day and year's changing seasons.

There were no fences here in the moun-

tains and desert stretches of Arizona. No blatting sheep lousing up his big open range. But the long drouth had dried up the water and parched the grass.

His puckered eyes seemed to look out beyond the rodeo grounds, miles past the mountains now hidden in the black rain clouds, to his new range that was getting its drouth-breaking soaking.

Perhaps he was making some wordless prayer, though Dad Jackson had never been heard to voice the name of his Maker either in prayer or profanity. And it was rumored that back in his younger, wilder days he had ridden the Outlaw Trail from the Mexican border to the Canadian line. But even his enemies, and Dad Jackson had his cowman's share of them, had to admit that he was a square dealer whose word was as good as any man's bond.

The sounds of a ruckus down around the bucking chutes and corrals now interrupted whatever Dad Jackson was thinking.

The sudden storm of small cloudburst ferocity, had driven the cowpuncher contestants to the inadequate shelter of the corrals and bucking chutes.

There were the professional or semi-professional rodeo contestants in bright colored silk shirts and tailored pants and fancy topped boots, and the working brush-popper cowhands in weather faded blue denim brush jackets and Levi overall pants. But the higher paid drifting professionals and the forty a month cowhands were all of the same breed of men. The former had only graduated from the ranks of the working cowhands.

It was a pair of the latter brush-popper cowpunchers who were the center of the ruckus. And even before he looked down at them Dad Jackson's slow grin was flattened into a hard grim line, as if he had been expecting for a long time the thing he dreaded now to watch. Because both Ramon Rivers and Harry—"Never"—Swett both worked for Dad Jackson's Muleshoe outfit. He had brought them both down here to Arizona with him when he left Montana.

Ramon Rivers and Never Swett—the fastest pair of team-tiers in the cow-country. Only by a fluke, one of those bad luck breaks, they had this early afternoon, missed lowering the world's record held by professional cowboy contestants. Never Swett's catch rope had broken when he caught his last steer. Even with his second loop he had come within a couple of seconds of equalling that world's record.

Not a word had passed between the two men at the time. And even later on, little black haired, black eyed, grinning Ramon Rivers had said nothing. Yet both members of that fast roping team knew that the bad luck had been, when you came right down to cold facts, the bull-headed fault of big, tow-headed Never Swett. Unless you wanted to probe further and lay the blame on that jug of corn whiskey hidden in behind the corrals. Or on that rodeo circuit cowgirl, Fay Gordon, who did trick riding and fancy roping.

★

NEVER SWETT had hit the jug a few times. Then that little red-headed rodeo girl had made eyes at the big, shy Never Swett. Ramon Rivers had seen her hand Never Swett a catch rope. Had watched her tilt her curly red head back to look up into the big cowhand's flushed face. And Ramon had heard her silky, husky voiced request.

"Use my rope, Handsome. I want it for a souvenir after you've busted the world's record with it."

The corn whiskey had made Never Swett bold enough to ask, "Does the gal go with the ketch rope, Fay?"

"Quien sabe?" she'd smiled up at him. "Who can tell?"

That was the catch rope that had snapped apart near the hondo. And valuable seconds, where split-seconds count, had been lost while big Never Swett shook a fast loop in his second rope and made his catch. Ramon Rivers' sure loop had picked up the steer's heels almost before the head rope had tightened its slack between the steer's horns and the horn on Never Swett's saddle.

Ramon Rivers had not spoken a word of reproach. If there had been malice or blame in his white toothed grin, nobody but Never Swett noticed it.

Even with that bad luck they had won over a score of roping teams that repre-

sented the top ranking professionals and range cowhands. And they'd won some heavy side bets. Besides the big bonus Dad Jackson would hand them.

It was big Never Swett who did the brooding. But not in silence or by any audible beefing or cussing. He didn't cuss the broken rope, or make the hot-headed mistake of fighting his horse. He had tied a new hondo knot in the broken rope and coiled it slowly, calling out to Fay Gordon with a wide grin that had only a faint twist of bitterness.

"That broke it, lady," he said, his voice a little too loud. "So-long." And he loped on around the bucking chutes to the hidden jug behind the corrals, the coiled rope dropped over his saddle horn.

Never Swett was inclined to be loud mouthed and roughly playful when he drank too much. His two hundred and twenty-five pounds was all big bone and hard muscle and he could toss men around like they were small boys.

Bulldogging steers was kid's play for the big cowpuncher. Wrestling or any rough and tumble fight was just a game where he never lost. But his joshing was rough and his horseplay left smaller men black and blue, bruised and shaken.

He never bothered Ramon Rivers; never joshed him. He made a point of leaving the tough hot-tempered little half-breed Mexican strictly alone. They roped steers together as a team and worked together on the range or at a contest with the unfailing swift precision of a machine. But their hatred for one another was as strong as acid, as bitter as gall. Nobody here in the Southwest knew why Ramon Rivers and Never Swett hated one another. Or if any one man on earth did know the real cause of that cold enmity, that man was Dad Jackson.

Dad Jackson saw it happen now, from the high perch of the stand where he was one of the judges. And he could do nothing at all to prevent it.

Little Ramon Rivers was what they called a neat dresser. His taste did not run to fancy, tight-fitting cowpuncher pants or gaudy shirts. But the shirt he wore was always clean and he had washed out his levi overalls until they were faded almost white. His boots fitted his small feet like gloves. He kept his black Stetson dusted and clean of sweat stains around the base of its crown. And around his lean brown throat he always wore a clean black silk neckscarf. Not loosely knotted but wound snugly and carefully tied at the back of his neck. In the hottest weather, on the range or in town, he wore it like a man with a black silk bandaged sore throat. But there was a glitter in his black eyes that kept men from joshing him about it.

Now Dad Jackson looked down at it. He saw big Never Swett fooling around with a coiled catch rope. Throwing quick backhand loops at the heads and shoulders of the cowpuncher contestants standing or squatting on their hunkers, down there in the rain and mud. But they were watching the big, half tipsy, rough horseplaying cowhand. One after another they warded off the deftly tossed loop and flung it back at him.

There was a grin on the big cowpuncher's square face. He shook a small loop into shape. A wicked sort of glint showed in his bloodshot sage-green eyes.

Ramon Rivers was squatted on his spurred boot heels, whittling long thin shavings from a stick of soft pine box board. His back was towards the others and from under the low pulled brim of his black hat his black eyes watched the lightning-struck pine on the knoll behind the grandstand. The long whetted blade of his stock-knife pared shavings. His thick black brows met in a thoughtful scowl, and his faint smile under his carefully trimmed mustache was mirthless. He was watching that lightning-struck pine with the fascination and intentness of a man who is conjuring up something unpleasant and grim out of the past.

Never Swett's loop flipped out silently, dropping with skilled accuracy down over the black hat. It tightened around Ramon Rivers' neck with its black silk covering.

The split-second reaction was startling. Those cowpunchers nearby heard the choked, startled cry that seemed torn from Ramon Rivers' throat. Dad Jackson's big hands gripped the rail until his knuckles showed white.

Ramon Rivers was on his feet with catlike speed. The pointed, whetted blade slashed the rope. His other tore the noose from his neck. The swift yank was violent

enough to tear off the knotted black silk handkerchief with it.

Ramon Rivers' face was a sickly yellowish twisted mask. Against that paleness, the red scar that circled his neck was as vivid as a scarlet brand. His black eyes glittered like the eyes of a snake. He was gasping for breath as if the noose had actually strangled him instead of barely tightening around his neck.

For no more than a second or two Ramon Rivers stood there, crouched on half bent legs. Then he quit the ground with a swift leap that sent big Never Swett reeling backwards. The knife blade glittered in the gray rain as it cut and slashed and stabbed.

Big Never Swett bellowed like a goaded bull in a Mexican bullring. His big powerful hands grabbed desperately at the small, knife-wielder. They went down into the water and mud in a wild tangle that was reddening.

Fay Gordon screamed once, then went silent. Her gray green eyes widened with fright. When her voice sounded it was brittle:

"The damned little greaser's got a knife. Pull him off, Gordon!"

Some said they were brother and sister, as they claimed to be. The rodeo circuit contestants grinned and winked and said nothing. A brother and sister trick riding and fancy roping team draw better than a man and wife act.

Slim Gordon gave her a hard, quick look and his thin-lipped smile was taunting. He never moved out of his boot tracks.

It was about a fifteen foot drop from the judges' stand to the muddy ground in front of the bucking chutes. The ground was slippery and Dad Jackson's boots slid and he went down on his hands and knees. But he was up on his feet quickly, without a single wasted or lost motion.

He grabbed Ramon Rivers' wrist and clamped down until the knife dropped from the half-breed's hand that had been numbed by the steel-trap grip. Then he yanked Ramon onto his feet and growled through his gray mustache:

"Git a tail-holt on yourself, Ramon."

He squatted on his boot heels beside the knife ripped big Never Swett and growled up at the judges' stand for somebody to fetch around a rig and get hold of a doctor. Damned quick.

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RAMON RIVERS was mud-soiled and his rain wet clothes smeared with big Never Swett's blood. He was panting like a spent runner, his upper lip with its thin mustache curled back in an animal snarl.

He bent over and picked up his knife, snapped the blade shut and shoved the knife into his pocket. He still held the short length of rope he had cut apart and yanked from his neck. It was a new brand of hard twist manila hemp rope that had one black strand twisted with the three natural colored strands, and marketed under the trade name of Black Jack rope.

Slim and Fay Gordon were the only ones here who were using the new Black Jack rope for their calf roping and team tying. The short length of rope had a new hondo tied in its broken end. It was what was left of the catch rope Fay Gordon had handed Never Swett to tie his last and final steer. But Ramon Rivers was not aware of that fact. Not yet,

He stood there watching Dad Jackson and big Never Swett who was struggling to get onto his feet and fight.

"Lemme go, Dad," Never Swett was almost sobbing, "I'll twist his damned head off his rope-burnt neck."

"Take it easy, Swett," growled the big cowman, "You're bleedin' like a stuck beef."

Ramon Rivers' free hand went to his bare throat. Wild panic showed now in his eyes as his fingers fumbled to pull his open collar together.

Dad Jackson was wearing a rain-soaked, white silk handkerchief loosely knotted around his neck. He untied it and tossed it to the half-breed Mexican who wound it quickly around the old red scar that circled his neck. But men were watching him and he knew that their eyes had seen the old scar he'd always kept hidden. There was a haunted, trapped glitter in his eyes.

Then the doctor came with a black bag. A covered rig drove up behind the bucking chutes. Sheriff George Ruffner loped up on his big white gelding.

"What's the ruckus, Dad?" drawled the big law officer.

"Nothin' that I can't handle, George. Two of my men. The argument's done settled."

The rain was already passing over, thinning to a drizzle. The doctor cut away Never Swett's denim brush-jumper and shirt and undershirt and his fingers worked swiftly as he dressed and bandaged the half dozen superficial knife wounds in Heavy Swett's burly shoulders and heavily muscled back. They might have killed a man of slimmer build. Even so, he had lost a lot of blood.

Never Swett refused to get in the spring wagon. He said he'd ride his own horse back to town. He was grinning faintly and his bloodshot green eyes watched Ramon Rivers. He drank thirstily when some cowpuncher handed him the jug of corn whiskey. The wet denim jumper was fit to wear and Dad Jackson helped the wounded cowhand into it and buttoned it up across his hairy chest. He would have stayed, but Dad Jackson told him to get on his horse and back to town. That he was in bad shape.

"You, too, Ramon," he growled, and mounted his own horse.

The cowman was riding along between the two enemies as they started from the rodeo grounds and headed back for town. . . .

Fay Gordon's face was white as she turned to her pardner. "That knife-slingin' little greaser!"

"Too bad he didn't spill that big ox's guts in the mud," Slim Gordon's thin lipped grin twisted.

The girl slapped him hard, then turned and walked away.

Neither of them had raised their voices. The girl had moved so quickly that no more than two or three of the contestants had overheard their words or seen Fay Gordon slap her partner's face. Doc Pardee, the arena director, was announcing the next event on the program.

"The storm's over, folks! Fold up your bumbershoots and come out from under your seats. While we're gettin' ready for the wild cow milkin', you'll have the rare privilege of watchin' in action the one and only Fay Gordon, world's champion lady roper and trick rider. . . ."

The soldier band from Fort Whipple began playing a military march. Fay Gordon, shedding a yellow saddle slicker, rode out on her sleek, showy palomino. In her tight fitting white buckskin pants and jacket and fancy boots and big cream colored Stetson, riding with the easy seat of a born rider, she lifted her hat and shook out her thick mop of coppery red curls.

The sun broke through the clouds. The crowd cheered. Cowpunchers and cattlemen of all ages grinned at one another. Women smiled their envy and admiration. Trick riding at breakneck speed with the ground muddy and slippery was dangerous. The cream colored palomino and the girl's beautiful white buckskins got sadly spattered. Fay Gordon went through every dangerous trick in her routine. Dangerous even when the ground was dry. Foolhardy, now, in the slippery mud.

Slim Gordon watched, his pale yellow eyes narrowed. The twisted, thin grin was frozen on his handsome face. Men who had played poker with him had tried to read those yellow eyes and see in behind the mask, for Slim Gordon was a gambler.

Some called him a tinhorn gambler. He made more money with his dice and cards than he did from his trick riding and fancy roping act with his partner Fay. And they were the highest paid team on the rodeo circuit.

But for a moment cold-blooded murder glinted in his eyes. His trick riding act followed Fay's. And while hers was dangerous and spectacular enough, he had one or two or three stunts that she was not allowed to do at the shows they made, though he had taught her the tricks he kept for his own act. And now he saw Fay discarding her own easier and less dangerous routine to steal his cat, trick after trick.

He was helpless, robbed of the act he had spent long, dangerous years in perfecting. Worse than useless for him to go on after Fay had done his act. That crowd did not want to watch him or any man repeat the performance that slim little red-headed girl was putting on out there. Slim Gordon was hoping almost audibly that she'd break her beautiful damned neck.

The hardest, most dangerous trick of all was to start her horse from one end of the arena at a dead run. Quit her saddle, crawl down and under the horse's belly, crawl up on the other side, twist into the saddle again and ride out at the other end with both hands lifted. It was dangerous, even for Slim Gordon when the ground was dry. He'd already decided not to risk it in the slippery mud where one faltering running slide of a shod hoof meant disaster.

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LIKE Fay, he had shed his yellow saddle slicker. He, also, was wearing white buckskins and was sitting the mate to her palomino. Hatred flared in his narrowed yellow eyes for that slim red-headed girl who was his wife in name only, and that for purely business purposes to bind her to the act he had trained her in.

Once they had been close friends. And the friendship that had once existed had been killed by bickerings and open quarrels, professional jealousy and Slim Gordon's jealousy as a man when Fay openly flirted with other men.

Until now they hated one another. But never were they foolish enough to let that hatred interfere with their teamwork. And if Slim Gordon secretly loved Fay, he took pains never to let her know it, because that would give her an advantage over him. And Slim Gordon wanted to keep all advantages on his side.

Then it happened.

Swiftly, as if in answer to his innermost, bitter wish. Fay Gordon was going in under the belly of the running horse when they hit one of those mud puddles. There was a sideways, slipping lurch. Then horse and girl were down together in the mud.

Hardened cowpunchers sucked in their breath, the color fading in their faces as their eyes stared. A woman screamed, up there in the packed stands. Another woman fainted. Men turned their heads away, dreading to look at what they feared had happened.

The mud-spattered palomino scrambled to its feet and stood there, blowing hard. But the girl did not rise. She lay there in a pitiful, soiled little heap, her burnished copper curls pillowed in the muddy water. Blood was on her chalky white face. She did not move.

Big Never Swett had delayed their going. Now he whirled his horse and spurred to a run, covering the distance across the muddy arena before even Slim Gordon got there.

Dad Jackson followed at a lope. Ramon Rivers tied the short length of Black Jack rope to his saddle as he rode behind the cowman.

CHAPTER TWO

Sheriff Ruffner's Bear-Trap

SLIM GORDON almost rode down big Never Swett as the latter swung from his saddle near the motionless girl on the muddy ground. The big cowpuncher had to make a fast sideways jump to keep from being knocked down and trampled and kicked.

Slim Gordon quit his horse with a trick jump. As he landed on both feet, Never Swett grinned flatly and swung. His big fist caught Slim Gordon on the point of his lean jaw. It was like being kicked by an army mule. The trick rider's legs buckled at the knees and he went down in a sagging, senseless heap.

Then Never Swett picked up the limp and unconscious Fay Gordon in his arms and carried her as he would carry a small sleeping child, into the building that housed the County Fair exhibits. He put her on a canvas cot and the doctor took charge.

Never Swett stood, white faced and awkward, mud-soiled and blood-spattered, until the doctor motioned him aside and Dad Jackson led him away.

Big, tough, Never Swett was made of crude and simple material. A pretty cowgirl had smiled at him and made a flirting half-promise. He had failed her, so he reasoned, when he failed to break the world's record. World Champion Harry Swett could follow the rodeos as a real professional, or join the Buffalo Bill Show. But he'd lost by a bad luck break, and he was on his way back to the Muleshoe ranch and his forty-a-month brush-popper work. Then the girl had gotten

hurt. Maybe she was dying. Or dead. That fancy pardner of hers didn't count. Never Swett had handled him easily enough when he got in the way.

"Is she . . . dead, Doc?" Never Swett's voice was a croaking whisper.

The cow-country doctor heard the big cowpuncher's voice. He looked up from his preliminary examination and shook his head.

"She's still alive," he said, and bent again to his work.

The same covered spring wagon that had come around behind the bucking chutes now served as an ambulance for the injured girl. Never Swett rode along behind it all the way to the hospital at the edge of town. The color had come back into his tanned face but there was a glazed, stricken look in his bloodshot green eyes.

He swung from his horse when they halted at the hospital and handed his bridle reins to Dad Jackson.

"I'm hangin' aroun' here, Dad," he said quietly.

"Git a room here for yourself," said the cowman. "A hospital ain't a bad place for you, right now. You're bleedin' again."

Ramon Rivers dismounted. Dad Jackson scowled down at him from his saddle as the half breed Mexican handed him his bridle reins.

"It looked to me," he said flatly, "like Never Swett busted that tinhorn trick rider's jaw. Slim Gordon is bad medicine. And he's got friends. Me'n Never Swett both work for the Muleshoe outfit. I got to side him, if they start a ruckus."

Never Swett had already followed the doctor and the girl on the stretcher into the hospital, so he had not heard or paid any attention to Ramon Rivers.

The big cowman was scowling. Little Ramon Rivers flashed him a quick, white-toothed grin. "I got a tail-holt on myself, Dad. I get mad quick. Then I cool off fast. I ain't jumpin' Never Swett."

"I wasn't thinkin' about that, exactly," growled Dad Jackson. "You both know that neither of you kin afford to git into trouble. Sheriff Ruffner's a friend of mine and they don't come no bigger ner better, but he's the Law here. He's under

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oath to do his duty. He dont' scare a-tall. And they don't make the kind of money to buy him off."

"And you can't head-off Never Swett," grinned Ramon Rivers. "No more than you kin stop a bull on the prod when he charges. That girl made a damned fool of him, but he ain't got the brains to know it. If I quit him now, he's alone. Slim Gordon is bad medicine. Don't ask me to quit Never Swett in a tight."

Dad Jackson grinned slowly and nodded. "It's your neck, Ramon, and Never Swett's big hide on the law fence."

Ramon Rivers hand went to the white silk handkerchief that covered the ugly red scar around his neck. His eyes were black flint.

"Keep that short, Black Jack rope for me," he said flatly.

Dad Jackson watched the wiry little half breed as he turned away and walked towards the hospital door. Then a buckboard drove up and two men helped Slim Gordon out and up the walk to the hospital.

The trick rider's handsome face was an unhealthy yellow and he was holding his jaw in both mud-soiled hands. His slitted yellow eyes cut the grizzled cowman a hard, venomous look as the two rodeo cowboys with him led him along.

Dad Jackson growled profanely into his mustache as he led the two saddled horses on to town. Sheriff George Ruffner overtook him. Ruffner owned the big livery and feed barn.

"Doc says the little lady is smashed up bad," said the soft-spoken sheriff. "I tried to tell her not to tackle that trick ridin' in the mud, but she was too game. Or too doggoned mad about somethin' to listen. Somethin' about that pardner of hers double-crossin 'her. That big Never Swett kinda ruined Slim Gordon's jawbone. Wasn't that the little Mexican lookin' feller I saw goin' into the hospital?"

Dad Jackson nodded. "He's bookin' a hospital room for Never Swett. They're pardners."

"And that tangle they had was just playful?" drawled Sheriff Ruffner.

"Ramon is hot tempered. But he cools off quick."

"Slim Gordon won't cool off that easy," said the sheriff. "I'm leavin' a deputy at the hospital. He'll jail the first hombre that as much as talks out loud. Them good sisters ain't runnin' no saloon. Let them fellers do their fightin' down on Whiskey Row, and I don't bother 'em. But if ary man so much as talks outa turn in that Mercy Hospital, and I'll jail 'im and throw away the key!"

"And that goes," Dad Jackson grinned and finished the sheriff's unspoken warning, "for my Muleshoe cowhands. Fair enough, George."

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WHEN they had stabled their horses Sheriff Ruffner led the big cowman into his private office and brought out a bottle and two glasses. When they'd taken a drink the sheriff took out his worn leather wallet. From it he took a twenty dollar banknote and flattened it out on the desk.

"Law officers all over the country," he said, "was mailed a list of the serial numbers of a lot of the currency that was taken in the Union Pacific train robbery two years ago. This twenty dollar bill is on the list. It's the first of that stolen money that's bin put into circulation around here. Fourth of July rodeo week here is a good time and place to pass this kind of money. This was put into circulation along Whiskey Row last night. I'm on the lookout for more of the same. Too bad that tinhorn rodeo gambler is goin' into the hospital. I aimed to have a man settin' into the poker game he'd otherwise be bankin' tonight."

Sheriff George Ruffner picked up the twenty dollar bill and put it carefully back in his wallet. Then he poured two more drinks.

"You didn't tell me that, George," said Dad Jackson, "just to be talkin'."

"No."

Dad Jackson's slow grin spread across his granite face, but his eyes were as hard and cold as steel.

"Git it off your chest, George," he said quietly.

Sheriff George Ruffner enjoyed the reputation for being a mighty good horse trader. And a man has to be a shrewd judge of other men as well as an experi-

enced judge of horseflesh to make a living at horse dealing.

The livery and feed barn was George Ruffner's property. Here in his office men of all kinds were wont to gather to whittle and talk and swap horses. More than one big ranch deal had been made here. Cowmen preferred the barn to any lawyer's office when they were dickering. The big, easy-mannered peace officer knew that here, at his big barn, rather than at the sheriff's office over at the court house, was the place to talk to Dad Jackson.

"Since you come down here from Montana some years ago," said Sheriff George Ruffner, "and bought the big Muleshoe outfit and the remnants from the littler spreads around, there's bin talk. And when there's fellers like Ramon Rivers and Never Swett workin' for you, that makes for more talk. Most of that loose talk gits around to me sooner or later. If I thought some of that talk was true or had the foundation of truth, I wouldn't be drinkin' with you here at the barn. And I shore wouldn't be talkin' to you like I am."

Dad Jackson chuckled in a low rumbling growl. "I'd be locked in a cell, wearin' handcuffs and leg irons. I savvy, George. I've heard that my ranch was an outlaw way station. Go ahead with what you got to say."

"Doc Looney and I taken a quick look at Slim Gordon after Never Swett hit 'im. His jaw ain't busted. Kinda knocked outa joint. Doc will slip 'er back into the sockets in a jiffy. Slim Gordon' will be bankin' a high stake poker game tonight in one of the back rooms along Whiskey Row. I'd like for you to sit into that game.

"You've got the rep of bein' a better than average poker player who don't bother to sit in unless the chips cost real money. There'll be plenty of that kind of money in sight tonight. I'll give you this list of the serial numbers on that stolen money. You won't have much bother memorizin' 'em.

"I want you to watch close. See who bets that kind of foldin' money when his chips runs low. Hang onto what stolen money you rake in on the jackpots. Drop around to the barn here after the game busts up."

"That's stool-pigeon work, Sheriff. I don't like it." Dad Jackson's eyes were hard and bright as steel.

"You'd like it a hell of a lot less, Jackson," drawled Sheriff George Ruffner, "if some nosey range detective claimed you'd engineered the train robbery, hid out the train robbers, staked 'em to horses for a Mexico getaway, and was now passin' this stolen money."

Dad Jackson's face was gray. "The renegades that pulled off that train robbery was a gang of two-bit, pore imitations. Even a lame-brained railroad detective should know better than to figger me in on a deal with a sheepherder outfit like that bunch. They was scared. Used likker to warm the chill in their guts. They murdered two harmless mail clerks. Anybody knows that mail clerks don't pack guns. That coyote pack of mail robbers was scared into shootin'."

"Cowards," said the sheriff slowly, "kin be tricky. If they found out they were bein' warm-trailed they might unload enough of that dangerous money on you. And while this range detective was busy treein' you, they'd be a long ways gone with the bulk of the stolen money. You and Ramon Rivers and Never Swett might finally clear yourself, but the trial would be long and expensive in more ways than one. . . . Well, that's the bear trap, Jackson. Set and baited. I'm givin' you your chance to ketch a pack of coyotes in a bear trap. I wouldn't call that exactly a stool-pigeon job, mister."

"I still don't like the smell of it, Sheriff."

"Jails and prisons have a stink that's worse."

"You're workin' in with this range detective, George?"

"Hell, no! That pore misguided feller has you already sleeper-marked with the Law's earmark, and he's heatin' his irons to burn that prison brand on your hide. And on the hides of Ramon Rivers and Never Swett, too. I kinda got the general idea, from his talk, that this bounty hunter don't like you much. Mebbyso you recollect him from the back-yonder days. Hatchet-faced, gimlet-eyed cuss that makes you think of a long strip of jerky hung on the line. He'd double-cross his own grandmaw fer a bounty.

"Jasper Rose." Dad Jackson's voice was a low growl.

"That's the feller. I couldn't warm up to him worth a damn." Sheriff George Ruffner picked up his small filled glass and stared at its amber contents.

Dad Jackson reached for his drink. "I'm sittin' into that high stake poker game, George."

Their glasses touched before they drank. These two men savvied one another. They spoke the same language. They came from the same big, square mold.

Sheriff George Ruffner said that Fay Gordon getting hurt bad was sort of gumming the marked cards that Slim Gordon was stacking. And that Slim's dislocated jaw was going to pain him some tonight. But Doc Looney would give the tinhorn rodeo gambler some pills that would kill the pain without slowing down his poker brains.

"If Never Swett ain't in too bad a shape," said the sheriff, "deal him and Ramon Rivers into the game. They must have won enough bets and prize money to buy chips even in the high stake game Slim Gordon banks. But before you hunt up that game, drop around here to the barn, to look at your horses. I'll swap you some money—dollar for dollar. The money I'm swappin' you will be marked."

CHAPTER THREE

The Battle of Whiskey Row

RED chips cost a dollar apiece; blues were worth five, and ten dollars was the price of a yellow chip. Alongside the stacks of red, blue and yellow chips each player had in front of him, were neatly piled twenty-dollar banknotes. There were no twenty dollar chips.

The back room at the Palace, on Whiskey Row, was just the right size for the round, green, cloth-covered poker table of the players. The shaded lamp above and the comfortable barroom armchairs the table shed the right amount of light without throwing glare.

Never Swett and Ramon Rivers sat on either side of Jackson. On Slim Gordon's right and left sat a pair of hard-eyed cowpunchers who followed the rodeo circuit. And while neither of them had so much as qualified for day money in any of the events, they had money and lots of it to gamble with.

The man on Slim Gordon's right was short and stocky and blunt featured, reddish complexioned. Slim Gordon called him Shorty.

The man on the tinhorn gambler's left was tall and lean, lantern jawed and hawk beaked. His eyes were pale blue and his hair mud-colored. He was called Whitey Jones.

Both wore cartridge belts and holstered six-shooters. They might be packing sneak guns hidden somewhere. Slim Gordon's ivory handled six-shooter was in a shoulder holster that fitted the gun low in under his left armpit. The edge of a small double-barreled derringer pistol showed in the pocket of his unbuttoned buckskin vest.

Dad Jackson, Ramon Rivers and Never Swett wore cartridge belts and holstered six-shooters.

Slim Gordon's jaw was swollen in front of each ear. Now and then he put a small white pill in his mouth and washed it down with beer. Never Swett was working on the same kind of white pills and using whiskey to chase the pill down his throat.

Shorty and Whitey Jones poured drinks from the same bottle. Neither Dad Jackson nor Ramon Rivers were drinking anything stronger than beer.

The game was stud. Two other men had played until they went broke. Shorty and Whitey Jones had taken the chairs that the two rodeo cowboys had left vacant.

The high stake game was strictly private. No visitors allowed. The waiter fetched drinks and took away empties. Some time around midnight Doc Looney came in long enough to tell them that Fay Gordon was resting easy under an opiate.

She had some broken bones that might leave her crippled for life so that she'd never walk without crutches, Doc Looney said with what seemed almost brutal frankness. But she would live. And he could not tell how badly her face would remain scarred until the bandages were removed and the facial wounds healed.

Fay Gordon would be maimed, crippled for life, Doc Looney finished, but she'd live.

He closed the door and left them.

Never Swett had opened his large mouth to say that he'd seen Fay Gordon's face and that it wasn't more than scratched and bruised. But Dad Jackson's boot heel had kicked Never Swett's shin and shut his mouth.

Slim Gordon had been knocked cold before he'd looked at his injured partner. His yellow eyes cut at Shorty and Whitey Jones. His voice was flat when he glanced across the table at Never Swett.

"I'll throw her in, Swett, with the next winnin' hand you hold!"

greaser's neck and strung 'im to a tree limb. Dad Jackson broke away from his guards and cut Rivers down before he strangled to death. The rope left a permanent scar around his neck. . . ."

"You figure Dad Jackson and Ramon Rivers and Never Swett broke their promise to the Montana governor and robbed the U.P. train?"

"The trail leads to the Muleshoe ranch. I collected a big bounty on 'em before. Dad Jackson and his two men will fetch that much and more, this time. Teach them chicken-hearted governors that an outlaw don't never reform. . . . If they put up a fight, they're dead in their tracks. They'll never leave that back room alive.

Month by month, Western fiction fans are growing more enthusiastic over these colorful, swift-paced stories by Walt Coburn—and no wonder! For this cow-puncher writing man was born and raised in the cattle-country which he so dramatically portrays! You won't want to miss another smashing novel of Walt's in the December STAR WESTERN—on sale November 10th! Reserve your copy today!

If the tinhorn rodeo gambler expected a rise out of the big cowpuncher he was badly let down. Never Swett just grinned and nodded and said he'd hold Slim Gordon to that.

* * *

Sheriff George Ruffner of Prescott, Arizona, usually kept away from Whiskey Row on the Fourth of July rodeo nights. He turned that part of town over to celebrating cowmen and cowhands and told them to treat it right. It worked out for the best, that way.

But tonight he leaned against the long, well-lined bar at the Palace, worked on soft drinks, and swapped yarns with the range detective Jasper Rose. In the bounty hunter's inside coat pocket were bench warrants demanding the arrest, dead or alive, of Dad Jackson, Ramon Rivers and Harry—"Never"—Swett.

"They're what's left of the old Dad Jackson gang, Sheriff. A sentimental governor pardoned 'em after I'd tricked 'em into a trap that got the others killed. Killed like rats in a trap, no foolin'. The posse got a little out of hand. They put a rope around that little half-breed

I've sworn in Slim Gordon and those two rodeo cowboys as special deputies. My tip-off came from Slim Gordon. I told you that."

"Yeah. You told me."

Doc Looney came in. He had a drink with them at the bar. Doc looked a little tired but his eyes were twinkling.

"Game little lady, George. She'll be ridin' broncs, she says, in a month. She might, at that. Gave the sisters a hundred dollars towards the new chapel fund. She had your deputy, Roland Mosher, get the money out of the money belt she was wearing next to her skin when she was hurt.

"Mosher told her he had her money belt. She was worrying about it. Scared that partner of hers would swipe it. He asked about it before he asked about the girl when he got to the hospital. He and his two friends got nasty when Mosher wouldn't give him the filled money belt. But Mosher cooled 'em off fast. He's a good deputy, George. They'd have to kill him to get into Fay Gordon's room."

"Why," asked the range detective, "would anybody—"

The sudden sound of crashing six-shooters in the back room interrupted the range detective. He jerked his gun and started in that direction. Sheriff George Ruffner's long leg got in the man's way, tripping him. As the range detective sprawled headlong, his head struck the brass rail, knocking him out. It looked like an accident.

Sheriff George Ruffner grinned at Doc Looney. Then pulled his gun. His voice filled the saloon, mingling with the partly muffled gunfire in the closed back room.

"Stand back outa the way, men! I'll do what gun-work is called for. That game in the back room is strictly private."

★

SLIM GORDON prided himself on his skill as a gambler. He relished and enjoyed the sometimes dangerous element of chance that spiced his gambler's game. And he told himself that he had it figured out down to the last little detail. The percentage was always in his favor, he bragged to Fay Gordon, when he seemed to be taking a big risk. The dealer's percentage, he called it. And anybody who bucked his game was, in Slim Gordon's estimation, a sucker.

Practice; patient, endless practice. Perfecting the nimble skill of his fingers and the sharpness of his eye and the keen machinelike precision of his mathematical mind and his memory of cards dealt and those in the remainder of the deck. He studied the faces and the little give-away traits of the other players. Until he was able to tell whether or not they had a winning hand or were bluffing. Practice made for skill and that skill paid off in big jackpots.

And it was constant practice that had made Slim Gordon one of the best trick riders on the rodeo circuit or Wild West shows. He billed himself as the World's Champion. Skill and an uncanny sense of timing cut down the danger average; gave him his professional's percentage of safety, though trick riding called for cold steel nerves, a faultless sense of timing, split-second co-ordination of mind and nerves and muscles. One little mistake, a fraction of a second's hesitation, and the result was disaster.

Look what had happened to Fay. Now she was crippled for life. Finished. She'd discarded her own percentage when she'd lost her temper and tried to show off. After all the long months he'd spent teaching her what she knew about trick riding. To hell with her!

"Jackson's ace bets," he said, his voice flat.

That train hold-up, Slim Gordon mused. It had taken months of careful study and planning. Until one by one the elements of danger had been cut down, the chances of failure minimized. A hand-picked crew of men who could keep their mouths shut, drunk or sober, and would not blow up in a tight. The plans figured out to the last getaway and hideout detail. Even to throwing the blame, like a tossed ball, at Dad Jackson and Ramon Rivers and Never Swett, if the Law crowded their trail.

There had been only one error, one mistake. But it was nothing that a man could have foreseen. The black silk neck-scarf had slipped from Slim Gordon's face. One of the two mail clerks was a rodeo fan. He'd recognized the much publicized Slim Gordon.

"Cripes!" The young mail clerk had let it slip. "Slim Gordon!" The fool had voiced his own death warrant, and that of the other railway mail clerk.

Slim Gordon's gun had roared twice. It was cold-blooded murder.

"It was then, Slim Gordon explained the murder to Shorty and Whitey Jones, "or us. Weaken on me and I'll gut-shoot you both."

Slim Gordon hadn't lost his nerve. None of them had been drunk. It had been a three man job, and had netted them fifty thousand dollars. They made the Cheyenne rodeo that same week. Slim and Fay Gordon, the trick riding and roping team, had top billing there.

Fay had met Slim Gordon there at the hotel, where she had booked their suite of rooms. She had showed him a newspaper that headlined the train robbery. She was just about the only person he could not fool.

"Sort of stepped outa your class, didn't you, Gordon?"

"A woman can't testify against her husband in court," he'd told her flatly.

"That's the Law. String your bets with me and you'll wear diamonds. Cross me up and I'll kill you. You'll get your cut."

"I never double-crossed anybody in my life, Gordon. I'm no squealer. And don't count on me passin' this dangerous money for you. I wouldn't touch a dollar of it with a ten foot prod-pole."

But Slim Gordon, after a two-year wait, had managed to mix in enough of that stolen money with their rodeo pay. He'd figured that the percentage was safe enough. Until a hatchet faced, gimlet-eyed stranger had showed him a crumpled twenty dollar bill at Denver.

"Fay Gordon passed this. She's your wife. Where'd she get it?" Jasper Rose had a metal badge in the palm of his other hand.

Split second thinking. Cold steel nerves. "I deal a little cards around the rodeo circuit mister. I'm paid to pass that money. I never asked where it come from. But I'm not any man's sucker, mister. Deal me into the clear and I'll tip you off. I'm fresh out of that kind of money, but I'm due to pick up a new load. Pinch me and you get nobody but a damned Patsy. If you're huntin' big bounty wolves, I'll help you trap 'em for a cut of the proceeds. Do we cut the cold turkey together, mister. . . . ?"

★

DAD JACKSON'S ace was betting twenty. Shorty and Whitey Jones and Never Swett dropped out. Ramon Rivers was staying. Slim Gordon slid one of the stolen twenty dollars bills into the middle of the table and dealt three cards with his left hand. He had a king in sight and one in the hole but he knew that Dad Jackson had an ace buried. Ramon Rivers had paired the queen he had in sight.

The game had gone just as Slim Gordon had planned it. He had taken enough good, safe money in payment for chips, to make it a big night's profit. He had won most of Dad Jackson's good twenty dollar bills. And he had lost to the grizzled cowman all but two or three of the stolen twenties.

Now, in the dark hour before dawn, Slim Gordon had exchanged stolen money for good money and raked in a big profit besides. Dad Jackson, Ramon Rivers and Never Swett all had some of that stolen money. Dad Jackson, the heaviest player, had the bulk of it. When Ramon Rivers' pair of queens bet twenty dollars, Slim Gordon shoved in the last of the stolen twenties.

Dad Jackson caught his ace on the next deal. That gave him three aces. Ramon Rivers got a third queen. Slim Gordon dealt himself a deuce of spades and said that put him out of the running.

He reached out to push the button that called the waiter. The waiter would get his order for a fresh bottle of whiskey and a new deck of cards. Out in the saloon the range detective Jasper Rose would be waiting. Watching for that order of a bottle of whiskey and a new deck. That was the signal arranged between Slim Gordon and the range detective. This was the showdown.

Slim Gordon was banking on that enmity between Ramon Rivers and Never Swett; that knife-fight. And the two men, sitting on either side of their boss, Dad Jackson, had not spoken to one another all night. And Slim Gordon had watched the looks they exchanged—silent, hard-eyed, and ugly. Anyhow, Shorty and Whitey Jones would be covering Ramon Rivers and Never Swett when that hatchet-faced range detective opened the door after the waiter took the order. Slim Gordon's thumb was almost on the wall button when Dad Jackson's deep growl stopped him.

"The game is strictly private, Gordon. In case you're aimin' to deal in that bounty-huntin' Jasper Rose!"

It came without warning, like being kicked hard in the belly by a horse with a hind foot tied up. Slim Gordon's faculty for split second co-ordination failed him. In order to reach the push button on the wall behind him he was twisted around, off balance.

He'd lost his dealer's percentage. But he'd never had it tonight. He knew that now, for Dad Jackson had been onto his game from the start, and had played him for a sucker. That big ex-outlaw had held the deal and the dealer's advantage from the beginning. That was the belly-kick.

Slim Gordon threw himself sideways out of his chair as he clawed for his gun. The gun was spewing fire before the trick rider hit the floor. Just as a heavy .45 slug from Dad Jackson's gun tore a hole in his belly.

Shorty and Whitey Jones had jerked their guns, kicked back their chairs as their gun hands moved.

Never Swett was slow-witted and a little clumsy. But the wiry little half-breed Mexican, Ramon Rivers, was chain lightning. There was a red glint in his opaque black eyes and his teeth were bared. The gun in his hand was spitting fire.

Big, grizzled Dad Jackson was on his feet. His legs spread to brace himself, crouched a little. His face gray granite in the smoke laden lamplight, his eyes slivers of polished steel. Slim Gordon's shots were wild now, but the big cowman who had once ridden the Outlaw Trail was sending bullets into the tinhorn gambler. Then Slim Gordon's long body stiffened rigidly and he rolled over on his back and lay there, his glazed yellow eyes staring, sightless now in death.

Shorty had gone down first under Ramon Rivers' swift and deadly gunfire. One of Never Swett's bullets had hit Whitey Jones but he was still on his feet and big Newer Swett was down on all fours when the little half-breed Mexican shot both Whitey's legs out from under him and sent another bullet into the man's right shoulder, crippling his gun-arm.

"You got me!" gasped Whitey Jones. "Don't shoot me no more!"

Ramon Rivers walked around the table and kicked the gun out of Whitey's hand. Then he stood over him as the train robber lay groaning on the floor.

"Didn't even spill them stacks of chips on the table," said Ramon Rivers. "Never Swett's bin itchin' all night to git to the hospital. Looks like he'll make the trip feet first."

Dad Jackson stood there for a long moment, his smoking six-shooter in his hand. Then he walked slowly to the door and opened it.

"Come and git 'em, Sheriff. Fetch the bounty-hunter. And I drummed up a little trade for Doc Looney. . . . Save Never Swett, Doc, and write out your own ticket. Keep that Whitey Jones alive long enough to tell it to Jasper Rose."

"You hurt?" asked Sheriff Ruffner.

"Me'n Ramon is bullet-proof, seems like. Come in. There's the cards and chips and money. My aces win that last pot. There's the game, just as she was when we pushed back our chairs. Slim got your marked money. I got the train robbery stuff. It'll tell the same story you'll git outa Whitey Jones."

CHAPTER FOUR

Team-Tied!

WHITEY JONES made a full confession before he died. He died, cursing Gordon and Rose.

Jasper Rose must have felt mean and sick inside. He would have gotten away from there and out of town quickly. But big, grizzled Dad Jackson barred his way.

"I'm sorry, mister," growled the big cowman, "that you wasn't in on the ruckus. I was thinkin' about you when I was shootin' Slim Gordon. Now git to hell gone while your luck holds!"

Dad Jackson told Sheriff George Ruffner to claim what bounty there was coming on the three dead train robbers. Do what he damned pleased with it.

"I wouldn't touch that kind of money, George. Neither would Ramon Rivers or Never Swett. Ner ary other real man that's ever heard the owl hoot."

The big cowman went on out to the hospital. Ramon Rivers had gone out with Doctor Looney and Never Swett in an Army ambulance from Fort Whipple.

Never Swett had two bullet holes in his big, burly frame but Doc Looney said he didn't see how a man that big and tough could die or even feel much pain. The big cowpuncher opened his eyes.

"How is she, Doc? I bin kinda thinkin'. Mebbyso if she's sorta crippled . . . or her face ain't so purty, she'll marry me. Reckon?"

"She won't be crippled," Doc Looney chewed his cold cigar. "She was pretty as a picture the last time I looked at her. She told me to lie about her condition to Slim Gordon. As for marrying you, that's your job. I'm no John Alden."

"Never heard of no rodeo cowpuncher called John Alden." Never Swett called to the ambulance driver to whip up, then closed his eyes wearily.

"She's been askin'." Deputy Sheriff Roland Mosher told Ramon Rivers when they had wheeled Never Swett into the operating room, "for you, Rivers. It's somethin' about a rope. Go on in."

Ramon Rivers went into the hospital room. The first slanting rays of the sunrise came in through the window. Its light turned Fay Gordon's curly hair into burnished copper.

"I know what you've been thinking," she smiled faintly at the little breed Mexican. "I saw you keep that Black Jack rope. Broke at the hondo. But before it broke and spoiled your time, when Never Swett used his second loop, the black strand and another had been cut.

"It was my rope. I gave it to Never Swett to use. For good luck. I hoped he'd ask me something, like he did, about me going with the rope. Slim Gordon and I had split up for good. I was going to make him give me a divorce. I'd told Slim that if Harry Swett asked me, I'd marry him after my divorce."

"So that's why Slim Gordon cut the rope when you wasn't watchin' him. I figgered the two of you was in on it."

"You saw Slim cut the rope?"

"And watched you give it to Never Swett," grinned Ramon Rivers.

"You let your pardner use a rope you knew would bust when that steer hit the end of it? When you had the world's fastest time there on the platter for you?"

Ramon Rivers nodded, flushing a little. "It looked to me like you and your pardner Slim Gordon was in cahoots. Never Swett was so damn' fool silly about you it was sickenin'. I aimed to call his attention later on to the cut rope. Wake him out of it with a jolt.

"Never Swett is kinda dumb. He never suspicions nobody of anything. Chances are he'd have tore me apart if I'd showed him why that ketch-rope of yours busted. But he roped me and I went hog wild."

"A rope around my neck sets me off thataway. I was strung up one time—hung. You all got a look at the rope mark that hangin' left around my neck."

"And I called you a greaser. I'm sorry, Ramon." She shoved out her hand. Ramon Rivers took it almost shyly.

"I'll tell Never Swett about the rope deal. There's times when I hate that big josher's guts. I can't stand joshin'. He says it's the Mexican in me. But mostly we git along. We've always bin pardners."

Ramon Rivers told her briefly about the shooting on Whiskey Row. That Slim Gordon was dead. That Never Swett was wounded but would be back on his feet about the same time Fay Gordon was riding a horse again.

"Never Swett will never git up the nerve to ask you. Dumb or not, he always manages to shift this kind of a job onto me. He wants you to marry him, Fay? What'll I tell him?"

"You and John Alden," Fay laughed a little shakily.

"Doc Looney mentioned that Alden gent. What outfit does he work for?"

"He repped for Captain John Smith. Back in the early days. He was a skypilot or somethin'. But he got the girl. I always figured she was a washout, or she'd have grabbed Cap Smith.

"You're all right, Ramon. You're aces in my deck—best man at our wedding. Tell Never Swett to limp in here and do his own askin'. And have you got a hundred bucks in your jeans? Good. Give it to the sister that ramrods the hospital. Swap it for the five twenty dollars bills I gave her. I wasn't trying to gyp the holy sisters, savvy, when I gave her money from that train robbery. I was paying off Slim Gordon for that busted ketch rope. Puttin' salt on that hombre's fine feathered tail, so a man named Jasper Rose could snare him. Bend down, Ramon. I'll give you a kiss to take to Never Swett. . . ."

* * *

Down at the livery and feed barn, Sheriff George Ruffner and Dad Jackson watched heavy black clouds gathering behind old Thumb Butte.

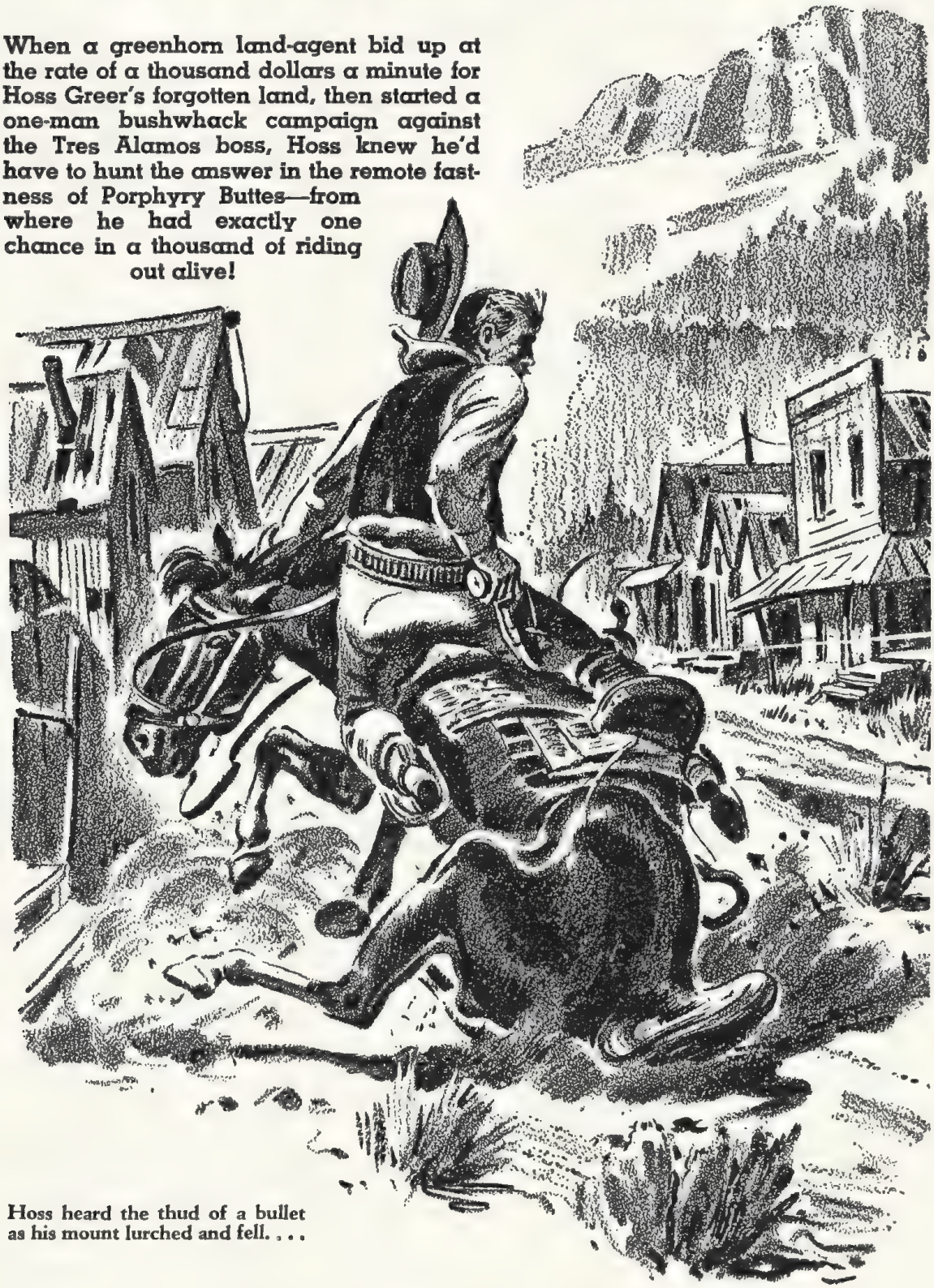
"That busts Ol' Man Drouth's backbone," Dad Jackson grinned slowly, "It's goin' to be a great year."

Sheriff George Ruffner nodded. His voice was a lazy soft drawl. "You got it a-comin', pardner. You earned it."

THE END

HOSS GREER— BONANZA BUSTER!

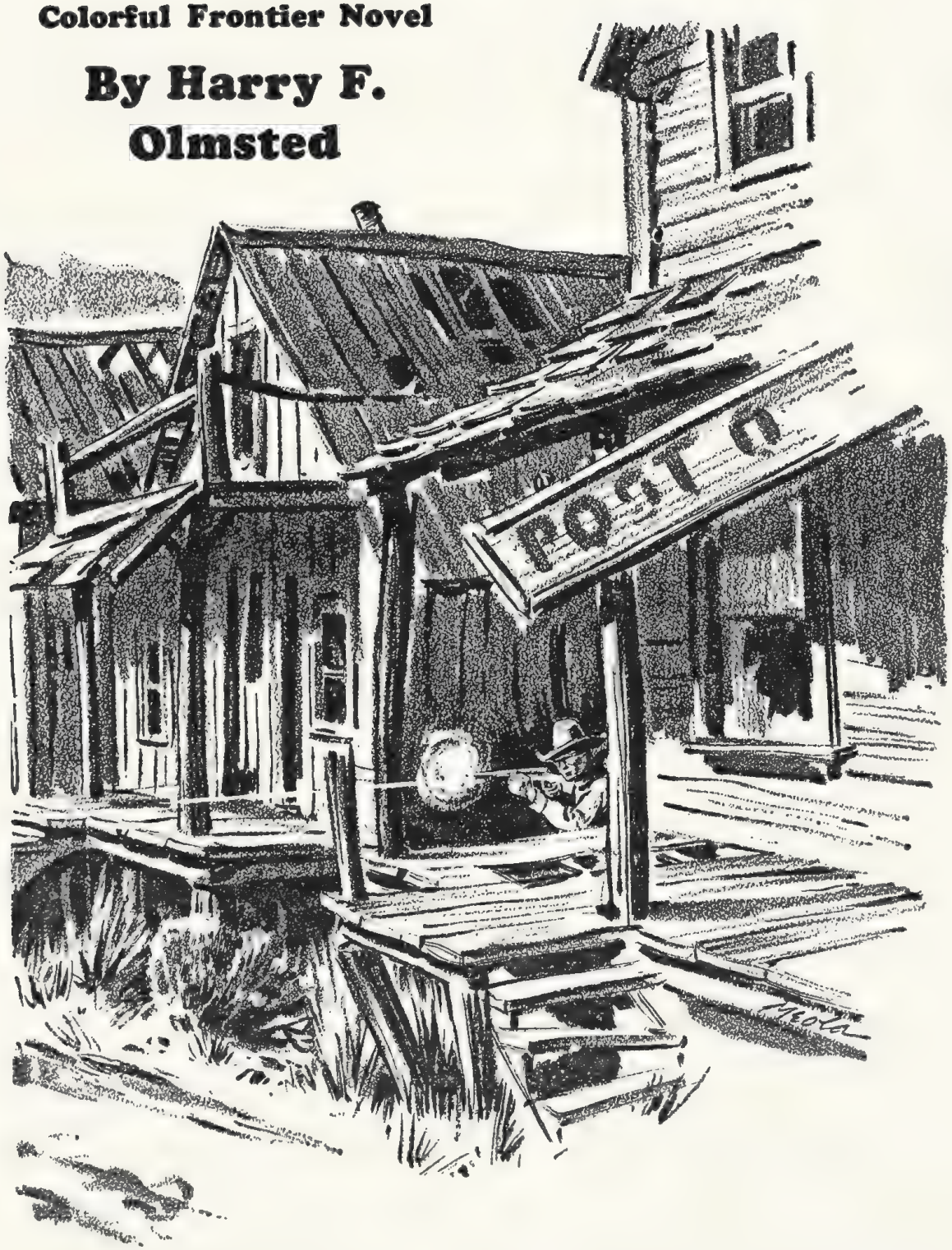
When a greenhorn land-agent bid up at the rate of a thousand dollars a minute for Hoss Greer's forgotten land, then started a one-man bushwhack campaign against the Tres Alamos boss, Hoss knew he'd have to hunt the answer in the remote fastness of Porphyry Buttes—from where he had exactly one chance in a thousand of riding out alive!



Hoss heard the thud of a bullet as his mount lurched and fell. . . .

Colorful Frontier Novel

By Harry F. Olmsted



CHAPTER ONE

Ten Thousand Dollars a Minute

MOST of Hoss Greer's fighting trouble stemmed directly from an invasion of his rights. But occasionally it slipped out of darkness, like a thief in the night, leaving him in doubt up to the instant of gunfire. Such was the Porphyry Butte affair.

It started when the overdressed rider came riding to Tres Alamos, standing in the stirrups as if galled. Always amused by tenderfoots, Hoss watched this one rein up to the rack, dismount lamely and

limp to the porch, where Hoss fought the heat with a busy fan and an iced drink. The man's temper was ragged.

"You Hostetter Greer?"

Hoss grimaced, instantly disliking the overbearing dude. "Hoss Greer's the name."

The man chuckled, eased into a chair and fished a card from his fat wallet. It read:

T. Riley Rossiter
Agent
Lands—Mines—Cattle—Loans
Madison & Center—Phoenix, Ariz.

"Hope we can deal, Greer." His fat hand came out. "It's a long way out here."

Hoss ignored the hand, called his Oriental servant. "Cool glass, Hung Soon. You say deal, Rossiter. Such as what?"

Rossiter avidly seized the glass from the Chinaman, drained it and put a palm fan to work. "Greer," he began, "you own Section 31, Township 3 North, Range 5 East, Squaw Peak Base and Meridian."

"Fine," scoffed Hoss. "Where the hell is it?"

The agent looked startled. "You . . . you don't know?"

Hoss snorted. "I own land in every county in Arizona but one. I'm dickerin' for a ranch there now. Township an' range stuff I leave to lawyers an' surveyors."

"This is in the Mazatzals—north end."

"*H'm-m-m,* near my Teepee Outfit, on Tonto. Pop Cane squatted there in the seventies, broke ground, fought off Apaches an' danged near lost it to a lousy homesteader a few years ago. I bought it for him, with scrip. When he cashed his chips, the old man left it to me. But it ain't in the Mazatzals."

"And it is not the place. The piece I mean's at the junction of Trout and Buckhorn Creeks, in the Forest Reserve."

Hoss shook his head. "I don't own nothin' there."

"Records show townsite of Porphyry Butte and Hobbled Mule Mine are yours by way of tax title."

"Ah-h!" That reminded Hoss of a forgotten deal and a pitifully brave little man. His mind turned back to the day Will Dunaway come riding to Tres Alamos—a cadaverous man with a golden smile, a hacking cough and quiet courage. Ravaged by a fearsome disease, facing a frightening and inhospitable wilderness, he had come from the Middle West for his health. Fate put him on the trail to Tres Alamos, where he quizzed Hoss on a place to stay while he awaited nature's cure.

Approving Dunaway's courage and humility, Hoss fixed a cabin for him, advised Hung Soon regarding his meals and set about testing his own ideas regarding the cure of hemorrhages. It was quite a system. Healing Indian tea and strong medicine from the creosote bush; rare steaks, two inches thick; a beef-juice-and-whiskey tonic. And, most important, regular periods in the saddle.

For six months Will Dunaway held his own, even seemed to be winning his fight. Then came winter, and a hard lung cold. He failed rapidly, and finally knew he had lost. Then he asked only to be taken to the train, so he could see his family before he died.

Hoss took the game little man to Phoenix in the buckboard bed, hired the best lung man in the Southwest to look Dunaway over. The medico's verdict was grim.

"He's got less than a month, Greer. Never did have a chance out here; too much lung tissue lost. Damn 'em, why do those Eastern doctors wait till their cases are lost before sending them out to us?"

Dunaway took it quietly. He asked for a lawyer and Hoss called his own. Then, expressing his gratitude for all the cowman had done, he assigned to him a piece of mountain land he had bought at a tax sale, the first day he arrived in Phoenix. He had been on his way to the property when a branch trail led him to Tres Alamos.

Hoss protested vainly, turned the title business over to his lawyer, saw the lunger on the train, bound East, and returned to Tres Alamos to forget it. And now he remembered. . . .

"I KNOW the property you're talkin' about," Hoss muttered, though he had never been within miles of it.

"Good, Mister Greer. I have a client who might put some money there and build up a resort proposition. How much do you hold the property at?"

Hoss shied. "That's right in the middle of my leased Forest Service range. I don't know why I should sell it even if I liked the idea of fool tenderfoots hellin' through the timber, shootin' at everything that moves, beef critters an' cowboys included. No, I wouldn't think of darin' some feller to put a resort in there. Suits me the way it is."

"I am empowered to offer you twenty thousand—a thousand cash in hand as earnest money and nineteen thousand when you sign the papers, my client to pay all incidental costs." Rossiter drew a thick sheaf of bills from his wallet and thumbed them over, wetting his thumbs and counting audibly.

Hoss was astounded. Except for its value as summer graze, the land was quite valueless in Hoss' book. While he had never been right to the old boom town of Porphyry Butte, many of his cowboys had.

The buildings still stood, thanks to there being no road. The old highway, along which millions of dollars worth of ore had been hauled by ten-mule-team wagons and trailers, had followed Buckhorn Creek, in the bottom. Always costly to maintain, it had been washed out altogether once the mines were abandoned. Now there wasn't even a good trail to the sight, else homesteaders from the lower country would have wrecked the buildings for the lumber.

The one real paying mine—The Hobbled Mule—had been forced to discontinue operations because of an inability of the management to control the water. For many years the diggings had been flooded, hopelessly flooded.

Where then could Rossiter's client see that kind of money in the remote holding? Surely not as a site for a summer resort. It would cost that much more to build a road to the place, half that much each year to keep it in repair. The buildings were too decrepit to be usable; even the warped and weathered lumber had outlived its usefulness.

Hoss was puzzled and showed it. And Rossiter, watching like a hawk, misread his doubt. As Hoss said: "I think you're crazy as—" the broker held up his pudgy hand.

"Don't say it!" he commanded. "I came to buy that property, Greer. How can I face my client if I return empty-handed?" He gazed at Hoss, as if to read what was in his mind. Then he snapped: "Thirty thousand!"

That took all the wind out of Hoss' sails. Again he started: "If you came here, Rossiter, to play me for a sucker—"

"Forty thousand!"

That clinched it. If Rossiter had stuck stuck to his first figure, Hoss would have been inclined to the belief he represented some fool rich man who didn't know the value of money. He might even have sold, figuring Will Dunaway's heirs would be delighted with such a return on a hundred and fifty dollar investment. It never occurred to the cowman that because it had been given to him he had any right to the proceeds from its sale. But when, without pressure on his part, the agent upped the price ten thousand and then ten thousand more, his very eagerness was a tipoff that there was an angle to this which needed sunlight turned upon it. Hoss rose, his face like granite.

"Excuse me, Rossiter, but I've got to look at some stock. I'll eyeball that propitty, and then let you know soon as possible."

"Wait . . . . just a minute!" Rossiter was begging now. "If only I knew your price—hell, say the word now and I'll offer fifty thousand."

"Generous, but I ain't got time, Rossiter. I'll give a look an' let you know."

"I'll await your convenience if you'll put me up."

"Sorry. I might be two-three days, mebby a month. I never know."

There was no changing him. Rossiter was fuming as he rode back up the trail. Hoss grinned a little and winked at the bland Chinese cook. "Hung, throw a bottle, some jerky an' socks into my bag. I gotta know why the hell a ghost town's gettin' valuable at the rate of ten thousand dollars a minute."

He bowlegged off the porch to saddle a horse, and was halfway to the corral when an angry hornet hummed past his face. He heard Hung yell a warning and

then the Tres Alamos bowl was echoing and re-echoing to the blast of a rifle shot. Crouched and cutting a crooked course, the cowman ran for the cover of the corral. His gun was in his hand but he held his fire, for the bushwhacker on the ridge was timber hidden and the range was too long. Quickly he saddled a fast horse and dared death in a dash to the top. A search turned up nothing. And though Hoss rode fifteen miles along the south trail, he got not so much as a whiff of Rossiter's dust. A saddle-galled tenderfoot had damn' near murdered him and then had neatly outrun him!

That brought up something equally if not more puzzling than the huge offer for the worthless boom townsite. Why would Rossiter want to kill the only man who could pass title to him? On the way back he wondered if he had entertained a maniac.

CHAPTER TWO

"I'm Only the Owner. . . ."

LATE next day, Hoss paused where Buckhorn Creek debouches from the Mazatzals, debating whether to ride to his Teepee spread for supper. Deciding that Archie Bunch, his foreman, and the boys might be overly curious as to his visit to Porphyry Butte, he took another reef in his belt and turned up the canyon.

The trail, leading up the firm, sandy streamway, showed nothing amiss until Hoss was suddenly confronted by a fresh slide that all but dammed the watercourse. Putting his pony up this, Hoss topped out on a rough grade of a roadway blasted from the rock. And suddenly he seemed to see through Rossiter's amazing offers. A road built across the Mazatzals, tapping Porphyry Butte. Yet even with that start, fifty thousand dollars for the abandoned mines and townsite didn't make sense.

Reaching for further answers, Hoss was suddenly conscious of hoof echoes behind him. Recalling that missed shot, Hoss was pulling into the brush when Archie Bunch came galloping up. Archie, foreman of Hoss' Teepee iron, was twenty-five and looked younger. He was good-looking and romantic, had undergone a lot of joshing about writing poetry and seemed too gentle for boss of a cow outfit. But Hoss knew him for a damned good cowman and had reserved judgment on the poetry angle.

Archie was flabbergasted and Hoss spoke the first word. "You lost, Archie? An' all spruced up like you was goin' to yore own weddin'. Neck an' ears warshed an' spurs let out to the town notch. *H'mmmm.* What's the occasion son?"

"I . . . . er . . . . I was headin' up to the camp."

"What camp?"

"Road outfit's up here a short piece."

"Who's buildin' this road, Archie? An' to where?"

"County, I reckon. I never asked, Hoss. Hear the old mines at Prophyry Butte are gonna open. Now I'll ask one. What you doin' up thisaway?"

They rode along together. Hoss said: "Ridin' to my Porphyry Butte propitty."

"Didn't know you had any up there, Hoss. Which is it?"

"All of it."

"All of what?"

"Everything, Archie. I own Porphyry Butte hide, bones, guts an' feathers."

"No!" Archie seemed startled. "Everything but the mines, mebby?"

"Mines too." Hoss chilled. "What you know of them mines. Any good?"

Hoss sensed a strain as Archie studied the question. "Could be, Hoss, if a feller pumped 'em out. Pumps has improved a lot since them mines was abandoned."

"Yeah, but engines?" argued Hoss. "You wouldn't cut pine to make steam?"

"Not if I could get 'lectricity. No more'n I'd let a crook sell me Phoenix town." Cutting scorn in Archie's tone roused more curiosity than anger in Hoss.

"How you mean that, Archie? Figger somebody stretched my pelt for me?"

"No less. I heard from Ol' Pop Cane how Preston Tanner laid out Porphyry Butte an' developed the mine. Town lots went to some five hundred people. 'Tain't likely you bought 'em all out, includin' the dead. So howcome?"

"Fair question, son." Hoss told him of Will Dunaway and his parting gesture. It seemed to depress the young foreman.

"Somethin' funny," he muttered, and they rode in silence until, rounding a point, they came suddenly upon the road

camp, set back under a line of cottonwoods, near a spring. Canvas cookshack, commissary and office, with numerous smaller sleeping tents. Scrapers, wagons and grading tools were scattered about. A mule corral, flanked by baled hay and sacked grain. Archie reined in. "If you don't like ghost towns of a moonlit night," he said, tartly, "come down to the ranch." Then, feeling an explanation due: "We run outa tobacco. I rode over fer a few caddies."

Hoss muttered: "Be seein' you, Archie," and kept on up canyon. Archie's lame excuse made no account of being so spruced up. Fox-trotting past the camp, Hoss noted the curiosity of the idle workers, saw three men come to the office door to stare. One of these drew a rough breath from Hoss. The distance was long, the light failing, but he couldn't be mistaken. That man was T. Riley Rossiter. Suddenly Hoss changed his mind about going right on to Porphyry Butte.

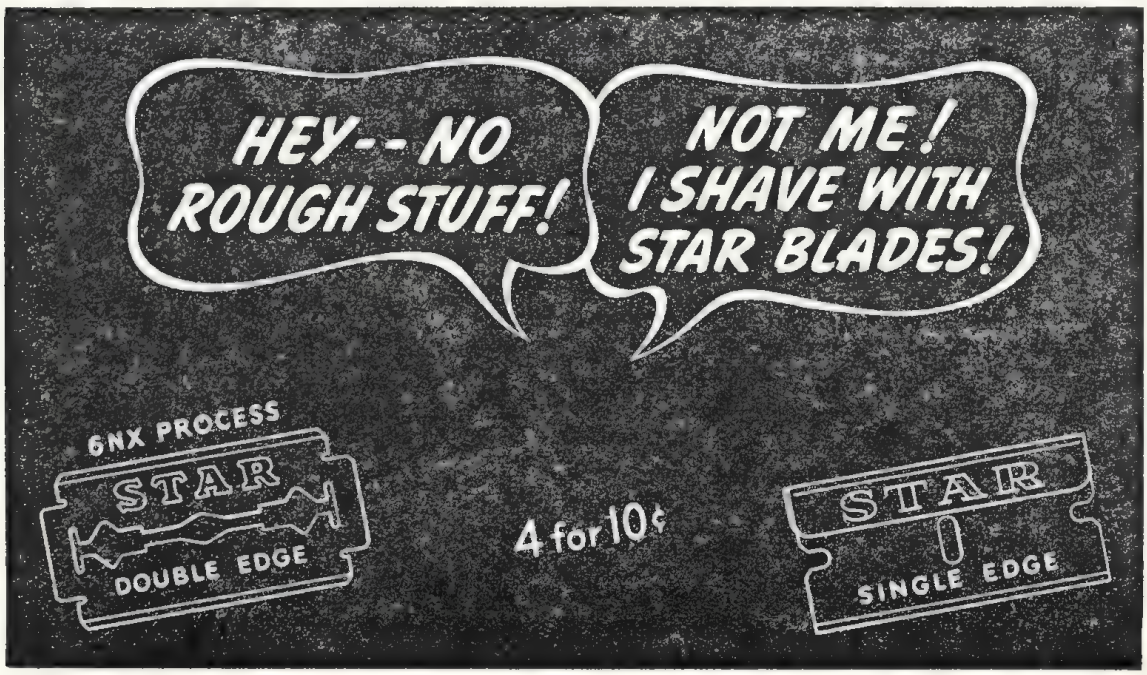
When he was around the bend hiding him from the camp, Hoss reined up in a gloomy draw to tie his pony and return to the main gulch, secreting himself behind huge boulders. He hadn't long to wait. Spurring savagely, three riders flashed around the bend, their eyes riveted up the canyon, their saddle guns across their laps. And leading those riders was the astounding Mr. Rossiter. Nor was there now any of the lameness and ineptitude he had shown when posing before Hoss as a tenderfoot agent from the big town.

When they had passed, Hoss drew a deep sigh, once again grateful for that seventh sense which touched him with life-preserving hunches. He moved down canyon now and, with night glooming the Mazatzals, entered the peaceful camp. Through a ventilator at the rear, he looked into the commissary.

Men drank at a short bar. Play was lively at the few gaming tables. At the merchandise counter, Archie Bunch stowed his purchases in a sack. Corn meal, canned milk and peaches, lard and hard candy. And when he left, Hoss followed. He couldn't believe Archie was out of food at the ranch. That he was right, was proven when Archie mounted and turned up canyon. Deeply puzzled, Hoss turned toward the lighted office, pressing into the shadows as two men emerged, talking. One said: "What ails Rossiter. Way he yelled for horses an' guns, you'd think he seen a bear."

"Can't figure that man," complained the other. "He's like an eel. I'm gettin' fed up tryin' to hold a crew together without any paydays. Gaddis Lupton's due tomorrow, an' it'll be too bad if he don't fetch money. Let's get a drink."

They drew away, leaving Hoss with a



flicker of enlightenment. This was not a county camp. And Gaddis Lupton, a get-rich-quick Phoenix promoter, was probably the client who wanted Porphyry Butte and the flooded diggings. Lupton! Hoss snorted. He was all hot air, full of unbacked confidence. This road work proved he hadn't even considered Hoss' refusal.

Now Hoss moved to where he could look into the office. There a man worked on a stool, under a bright Rochester lamp. His hand close to his gun, Hoss entered. The man, an engineer, to judge by his instruments, paled under Hoss' direct gaze. "What—what do you want?"

"Plain talk," said Hoss. "Who's building this road . . . . an' why?"

"Gaddis Lupton and Riley Rossiter. You'll have to ask them why."

"Where's the road going?"

"You better ask them that, too."

"I'm asking you, son." Hoss jabbed a pistol into his midriff. "Use a civil tongue an' you won't get hurt. Play smart-alick an' you'll sweat with other crooks. Nice map you're draftin' here . . . . Le's see."

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THE MAP was easy to read. The roadway was plainly shown, winding up Buckhorn Creek to Porphyry Butte. Around the townsite were spotted the mining claims. Surprise lay to the west. Along the plotted course of the Verde River was located the Lupton Dam, at Muleshoe Bend. Hoss recalled hearing of such a power enterprise, and put it down as a stock selling enterprise for suckers. But here it was shown and, more interesting to Hoss, the details of a power transmission line from the dam to Porphyry Butte.

That line recalled something else Hoss had read. An old feud with the Securities Commission had cost Lupton any chance of distributing his power unless he built his own lines. His answer was this—to pump out the watered Hobbled Mule and refine its ore. A craggy smile lit Hoss' rugged face. He had the bug in Rossiter's offer. Fifty thousand was peanuts. Lupton was looking towards millions and he was beaten without title to the Hobbled Mule. Well, he'd write one big check to get that.

Hoss could now grin good humoredly at the engineer, who was shabby and looked down at heel. Hoss laid a yellow-back bill on the map. "Thanks for the info, son. Buy yourself some smokes. What's your name?"

"John Dawson, sir."

"Civil or mining?"

"Mining, though I've had to take what I could get. Haven't done well, so when Lupton pays me, I'm heading home to Iowa."

"Hang an' rattle awhile, fella. Things will pick up an' you won't lose if you're around when Lupton goes bust. He thinks he's buying the Hobbled Mule. He ain't. When the mine opens, you'll be engineer if you want it. Interested?"

The man's eyes glistened. "Plenty." Then as he looked Hoss up and down, doubt rode him. "Interested, but not banking on it. Who might you be?"

"I'm only the owner of the Hobbled Mule. . . ." Hearing approaching bootsteps outside, Hoss cut off, gliding to the door and out. The moon had come up, bathing the canyon in an eerie orange light. Through the shadows of adjoining tents, Hoss spotted the movement of two advancing men. He was caught in the light and there was little chance of his slipping away unnoticed. So he chose the more direct way, and moved toward them.

Their talk fell away as they studied his unfamiliar figure. His face gloomed by a drooping hat brim, Hoss thought he would succeed in passing them. He muttered, 'Hi yuh, boys," and stepped aside to let them by. The one nearest him deliberately barred the way, sticking his bearded face almost in Hoss' own. Hoss caught the reek of sweat, then the fetid breath as the man bawled:

"Hey, this is that feller who rode past! The feller Rossiter said he'd pay that hundred dollars fer, dead or alive!"

Two powerfully muscled hands caught Hoss' arms. The cowman spun his body, tore loose. His gun flashed out and he struck. The arcing muzzle took the big man between the eyes, dropping him like a shot beef. Striving to avoid the second man's rush, Hoss tripped over his victim's

legs, went down. The second man swerved, fell on him, clubbing with his fists. A blow crashed off Hoss' jaw, stunning him, robbing him of strength. He tried to club the fellow with his gun, but the effort was easily brushed aside.

An inner voice was warning Hoss that he was as near death as he'd ever been in his violent career. For some reason—one that seemed a contradiction; Rossiter wanted him rubbed out. If this fellow subdued him, which he as good as had already, they would kill him mercilessly. Fingers were already at his throat when he got the muzzle of his Colt around, drew back the hammer and let fly.

A roaring detonation. A moan. All fight went out of his foe, who collapsed, a dead weight atop him. Hoss rolled off the grisly burden, found his feet, reeling groggily. The camp was rousing with raucous cries. The earth gave back the swift echoes of pounding boots. Hoss whirled and ran for the shadows of the big cottonwoods. They spotted him as he tore through a beam of lamplight and pursuit gathered like a river. Somebody discovered the two prone men, raised a cry of murder. Men were yelling for horses and guns and already bullets were slashing the brush Hoss smashed down in his mad try for his horse.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghost-Town Ghost

DETAILS of that desperate dash through thorny, clutching brush and over treacherous rocky footing were never clear to Old Hoss. He fell and rolled, filling his left arm painfully with cactus spines. He got up and tore on like a stampeding steer, falling again as a stone gave under his foot. Winded and spent, every muscle aching and all but out on his feet, he wobbled up the black gulch and found his pony. Heaving himself into the saddle, he reined to the mouth of the tributary, there to pause as pursuit straggled recklessly up the canyon.

Lust, born in the heat of excitement, cools rapidly under the threat of the death that sleeps in a gun barrel. Before long, the silent construction-camp posse came riding back in a body, passing Hoss who swearingly picked cactus spines, while hidden in a thicket of willows.

Waiting a reasonable time, against the possibility of there being others yet to come, Hoss continued his interrupted trip up canyon. Riding slowly, his ear cocked to the first threat ahead. But all was peaceful. Moonlight filled the canyon with pools of light and shadow. Bullbats croaked as they fed on the winged insects of the night. The echoes of his own pony's hoofbeats bounced hollowly off the rocky hillsides. An overpowering sense of loneliness touched Hoss, and then he had his first glimpse of Porphyry Butte.

The canyon suddenly opened up like the padm of a hand, with long fingers reaching up toward the ridge. The fingers were hogbacks, warted with decrepit shaft houses and mine dumps. In the palm, like a frightened covey of quail huddled together against a common danger, were the buildings of Porphyry Butte. And, overlying all, was the monolith from which the ghost town had inherited its name, frowning down like some grim old hen over a nestling brood of chicks.

For long minutes, Hoss sat his saddle, looking at that somnolent scene. The ravages of time, the weathering, the decay of buildings long untenanted, these things were softened in the deceptive moonlight, turned to bronze and gold, glorified. The spell of the place got into Hoss. A twisty little breeze played about his face, like ghost fingers, stirring gooseflesh along his spine. Half angrily he tried to shake off the mood, and failed, as a faint flush of light blossomed somewhere in the town—like a spectral wisp of yellow vapor.

Little prone to superstition, Hoss jabbed his pony with the spurs, sent the outraged animal leaping toward the town. He had to rein down to let his mount pick a fearful way across a rickety, loose-floored bridge. A few rods farther on, he dismounted in the shadow of a fragile walled structure, tied the pony to a sagging rack and began a measured, nervous advance along a boardwalk that creaked and teetered at each step.

The rattle of his spurs, the clump of his heels, seemed weirdly loud, and the crazy fronts gave off multiple echoes. Danger

seemed to press in, an unseen danger, a danger immune to worldly means of defense. Hoss drew a long breath, dropped his hand to the butt of his gun and felt comforted.

Now he came to an abrupt halt and his gun flashed out. Across the untracked street, deep under the overhang of an infirm awning, a pallid figure seemed to float. Holding his breath, Hoss watched it float away from him, until it hovered motionless, not a great way from where the flickering of some ghastly light played upon the street. A hollow, horrible voice rolled through the stillness:

"Go-o-o ba-a-a-ack, sinful me-e-en. Let us re-e-est."

Hoss whipped his gun level, shivered and let it down again. He had never believed in ghosts; maybe he had been wrong. Ghost or not, that voice belonged to a woman. And there had not been a woman here for twenty-five years. He had heard fool talk that a bullet is harmless to a ghost. If that creature was flesh and blood, a woman, surely she could do him no harm.

In fearful doubt, Hoss stood there staring. He heard a terrible, tremulous moan, followed by the clanking of a chain. Then the pale figure seemed to float through the wall of a building and disappear. And Hoss realized with a start that the building was a steepled church, behind which he could see the wan shafts marking burials. "I'm a damned ol' fool," he muttered, angrily, and forthwith doubted his judgment as the steeple bell began to toll—weakly, as if rocked by a feeble, phantom hand.

The sound died away. A gust of wind whirled along the street, starting up the ancient dust in a miniature cyclone. Hoss reached for his hat, missed it and chased into the street. The effort seemed to clear cobwebs from his mind. With courage that was normal to him, he moved toward the church, his jaw set stubbornly, his eyes slitted.

The church door stood open, swaying creakingly in the night breeze. Hoss stuck his head inside. There was a reek of animal waste and decay. Trade rats gnawed and squeaked. Hoss thumbed a match. A bat, alarmed by the light, whisked past him, extinguishing the flame. But Hoss had seen the wreckage of dust-bathed benches and an overturned altar . . . . and something else! A frayed rope end dropping from the belfry, swaying, swaying. Was that a chuckle that mocked him, or was it some trick of his suddenly overwrought nervous system?

Hoss took refuge in a growing anger, mostly against himself. And he might have investigated that church except for the sudden impact of voices against his ear drums. The ghostly, quivering reflection of light seemed to have grown stronger in the street. Hoss walked toward it. He might, he reflected, be up against a rendezvous of ghosts, here in this forgotten town. But damned if it wouldn't be worth it to prove the lie that ghosts can't stand light.

Silently he slid along the walk, until he reached the corner of a leaning building, past which the glow persisted. He paused there, all thoughts of haunts gone from his mind. He was looking at men, angry men, men with few spiritual qualities in that moment. They stood grouped beside a fire, in the wreckage of what had once been part of a boom prosperity, now collapsed and a tangle of fallen timbers. Three of the men held guns upon a fourth. One of the three was T. Riley Rossiter. The fourth was Archie Bunch—looking a little incompetent against that raging trio.

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"TO HELL with the ghosts," barked Rossiter. "I invite 'em in to bear witness we're being more than fair with a human mule. You work for Greer. Yon can't explain why you're up here, with a sack of groceries. That's all the evidence I need that the old gun-wolf is here somewhere. Now where is he? Talk up. I'm going to get him, if not here, then somewhere else. Where's he at?"

"I tell you I don't know." Archie was pale, tight-lipped. "I left him at the camp."

"For the last time, where is Hoss Greer?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't tell you, yuh grass-bellied coyote."

With a snarl, one of the trio whipped out a knife, made a pass at Archie's throat.

Rossiter struck the weapon down. "Don't, you fool! Kill him and we've wasted all this. Throw a rope over that beam, Skeeter. Ramon, you whip it below his wrist joints. He'll talk."

"Like hell I will," snapped Archie.

Hoss didn't interfere right then. Knowing some deception was being practiced by his soft-spoken foreman, he had nursed sudden prejudice against him. In fact, he had come within an ace of offering him his choice between coming clean or quitting—back yonder at the camp. When Hoss turned against a man, that man looked bad all over. But Archie's gritty defiance was reinstating him. Hoss only wanted to see what he'd do when they trussed him up. So he waited while they built the knots and hoisted Archie a foot off the floor.

"When you've got enough," barked Rossiter, "tell us where Greer's at."

"Go to hell!" It came savagely through the foreman's clenched teeth.

Hoss' gun flashed out and he stepped toward them. But his challenge died unborn on his lips. The sharp, rapping echo of a shot tore through the stillness. The one called Skeeter, who held the hitch in the rope, sighed, reeled violently and fell. Archie, dropping on his feet, made a fighting pass at Rossiter. The swart Ramon was turning on him with bared gun when Hoss roared: "This way, Ramon!" The man, a breed, whirled, his gun swinging. Hoss shot him dead.

Archie, fighting mad, had closed with Rossiter and was trying to loop his manacled arms over the fellow's head. Rossiter swerved from the embrace, sledged the foreman down with a cruel, clubbing blow, whirled and vanished behind tumbled wreckage. Hoss, tearing after him, found the way cluttered and was slow in getting to the alley at the rear of the buildings. He paused to listen. Hoof echoes lifted, yonder in the darkness. Hoss sent three bullets screaming down the alley. But Rossiter was gone swiftly, sounds of his escape diminishing abruptly as he gained the sandy canyon bottom.

Sore and irritated, framing the lecture he aimed to deliver to a duded-up foreman who had to all intents and purposes lied about his presence in the canyon, Hoss made his way back to the low-burning fire. Rossiter's two fallen saddle mates lay where they had dropped. But there was no sign or Archie. Thinking maybe he had gone to get his horse, Hoss waited with patent impatience. Five minutes. Ten.

Then, becoming suspicious, Hoss took stock. The sack of provisions, which had lain beside the blaze, was gone. So were the cartridge belts and weapons of the dead men. Again that sense of fearful loneliness haunted him. "Archie!" he bawled. Only echoes came back to mock him.

Gun in hand, vowing no good for Archie Bunch when he caught up with him, Hoss strode up the middle of the street to the edge of town, where he had tied his pony. It was gone, and Hoss cursed savagely. Again that grisly chuckle taunted him. And, seemingly down from the sky dropped a frangible voice, trembly and labored:

"You-o-o disturb my re-e-est. I ha-a-ave le-e-ed your pony across the bri-i-idge."

Hoss tried to locate that voice, failed. Disgruntled and a little shaky, he crossed the bridge to test the accuracy of that ghostly information. And there he found his roan, calmly cropping grass. Hoss mounted and discovered his saddle carbine was missing. He laughed scornfully. Damn little use a ghost would have for a rifle, which proved the wraith to be very, very human.

More bewildered than when he had arrived, sensing currents he could not begin to breast without more knowledge, Hoss turned his pony toward the crest of the Mazatzals. Southward, toward Four Peaks, was a Ranger station and a telephone. In Phoenix were the lawyers he paid by the year to answer just such annoying riddles as this.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devil Takes Vegetarians

THE CRACK of dawn caught Hoss on the Skyline Trail, with a vast panorama spread out below him, north, east, and west. Southward rose the timbered wall to the crest of Four Peaks. Eastward lay the Tonto Valley, with the

fair valleys of the Grimm-Tuxbray feud stretching beyond. Northward, like a guardian, stretched the bulwark of the Mogollon Rim. And to the west rolled the breaks of the Verde River. Yonder, like a scar pointing directly at him, ran a brushed defacement which, he knew, was the power line from the Lupton dam. Gaddis Lupton wasn't fooling.

Hoss found the ranger away from his station, but the cabin was open and the telephone working. Thus he got District Ranger Bill Foss, at Mesa City, a friend of long standing. Even so, he had to talk like a good one to get a personal call through to Phoenix. In due course he got Cash Carteret on the wire—junior partner of Ambrose, Brewster and Carteret, who for years had handled Hoss' business.

"Greer," he shouted, and Hoss caught the urgency in his tone. "Where in the devil have you been? We've been moving heaven and earth to run you down. You been drunk again?"

"Pull in your neck, Cash," rapped the old cowman. "Can't a man tend to his business without you fearin' he's gone on a brannigan?"

"Not the kind of business you've been up to, Hoss. If we've told you once, we've told you a hundred times: When you have any legal business to transact, let us at least put our stamp of approval on it. Oh, I know all about your fool ethics. A man's word is as good as his bond and a handshake is better insurance of honest intention than a signed contract. Poppycock. Someday you'll learn other men don't believe in those range ideals. Gaddis Lupton especially."

"Lupton?" Hoss was surprised. "It's him I called you up about."

"I'm afraid you're calling too late, Hoss. The paper you signed has been put on record here. It's carried in the Title Record—out yesterday. Hang on . . . . it is right here. Yes, let's see . . . . *all right, title and interest to that certain piece and parcel of land described as Section 31, Township 3 North, Range 5 East, Squaw Peak Base and Meridian, including all rights to each and several the following mining properties* . . . .

"Follows then the names of about twenty-five mining properties. It's the property you got from William Dunaway, several years ago. If you didn't get cash from Lupton, Hoss, I hope your contract hasn't holes in it. Lupton's a cute one."

Hoss hardly heard what the lawyer was saying. Now he had his finger on the last bug in that deal Rossiter had proposed. Figuring to have the key property one way or another, they had forged and recorded an instrument of transfer before sending Rossiter to see Hoss. If Hoss signed, well and good; there was nobody to challenge the fake signature. Whether or not he signed, he was slated for slaughter; that was about the plainest thing Hoss cauld make of it.

Very weakly, he said: "But, Cash, there wasn't no deal. I didn't sign nothin'."

"You mean this deed is a forgery?"

"If there is a deed, it sure ain't nothin' else but. Rossiter came out to the ranch, representin' Lupton, an' offered fifty-thousand for the property. I refused it, pendin' a look at the layout. Figgered if it was worth that much to him, it was mebby worth more to me. Ten minutes after Rossiter left, I was shot at. On my way to Porphyry Butte they tried to get me again. A road an' a power line are bein' built onto the propitty right now."

"Whee-ew!" Cash Carteret whistled. "That T. Riley Rossiter?"

"The same."

"Another crook. The deed's signed before witnesses. It will be very difficult to prove it a forgery, Hoss. Maybe a long court action, which we might lose. In the meantime, they'll have possession, and then. . . ."

"No way to euchre 'em except by proving they forged my name?"

"Well . . . . er . . . . there are certain legal angles which might be employed. First, is this property valuable?"

"Yes and no. If we can use power from—"

"Valuable enough to spend say a hundred thousand lawing Lupton?"

"His heirs," said Hoss, crisply. "Lupton won't be around too long, I figger, after the way he's jumped on me. I think Lupton's lookin' at millions, in the Hobbled Mule Mine. Does that answer yore question."

"Yes. Remember that Dunaway's title, your title and Lupton's title, such as it is, are all based on the original county tax

sale. But the mine was originally in the hands of a Preston Tanner, whereabouts now unknown. If we could secure quit-claims from Tanner, attack the tax titles prepared to pay Lupton's costs, I'm certain we could win. Any chance of ousting Lupton's men and taking possession?"

"Lupton's men ain't got possession. Ghosts are in charge right now. . . ."

"Ghosts?"

"You heard me right, Cash. Ghosts that moan an' rattle chains, ring bells an' collect firearms, not to mention shootin' almighty straight. And, between us, I don't think them ghosts like the Lupton crowd much."

"You're joking."

"Yeah, the way a undertaker jokes while he works. Nope, I'm dead serious. If possession's important, then we'll take it over. I'll ride down there now, to transact some unfinished business with them ghosts tonight. You get word to Gil Pastime at Tres Alamos. He's my Bell-clapper foreman. Tell him to hightail to Porphyry Butte with plenty rifles an' men who savvy triggerin' same. I'll meet him there unless them ghostses have got me. Anyhow, they're to take over things an' hold 'em." The lawyer was warning him about too direct action. "Leave that to me, Cash. You see can you get in touch with that Tanner feller."

"MISSION ACCOMPLISHED"

Those are welcome words when the big bombers come back, leaving behind an enemy war-plant in flames or a wrecked U-boat base. . . . Don't forget, however, that we still have a long way to go before the last such report is in. And it's your money, loaned at fair interest to the government, that helps to make possible those hard-hitting missions of our fighting forces. Sign up with the Third War Loan, and—buy a War Bond Every Pay Day!

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IT WAS the time of day when shadows ran well ahead of Hoss as he moved eastward down one of the fingers, toward the palm where the town of Porphyry Butte lay. As the town took shape in the haze, it looked to benign to harbor last night's realities. So peaceful, in fact, that Hoss drawing rein when he thought he heard distant gunfire, continued on when it was not repeated, believing it only a trick of his imagination.

Sometime later, he rode into a street smacking less of ghost at this hour than of abandonment and loneliness. His nerves, always sore where his safety was concerned, throbbed to a sense of danger. Not spooky danger, but something far more worldly—as if hard, unfriendly eyes stared at him.

Hoss was thinking about Archie Bunch when he spotted smoke wisping across the street, yonder. As he reined in, he heard something *whop* into his pony. The animal shuddered, lurched and fell. Hoss shook the stirrups off and stepped free. He pulled and threw down on a plume of gunsmoke at a building corner, but failed to shoot. The bushwhacker seemed suddenly unimportant as a rush of armed men swarmed into the street.

Overmatched, caught in the open, Hoss clawed back dirt getting to cover. He was crossing the walk when a door swung open and he looked into a carbine muzzle, backed by a feminine face pleasing despite its grimness and the two pools of ice under arched brows. "This way, Greer-man, to the bald-headed row. Front and center. Step in, says the spider to the fly, before they shoot off your suspender buttons. Easy now; don't point that hardware, McDuff. Where's your boasted Western chivalry?"

"Chivalry, hell!" rapped Hoss, puzzled, but he didn't wait on the order with bullets already splintering the walk at his heels. He ducked inside, the woman backing before him. He slammed the door. She ordered: "Bar it", which he did. Then he was looking at her, fascinated.

She was neither young nor old, life not time having pencilled her face. Admiringly, Hoss noted her curly hair of vivid auburn—a color he associated always with outstanding character. Her eyes, half humorous, half desperate, were dusky pur-

ple, like the evening haze of the hills. Levis accentuated the curves of her body.

His grimness softened the temper of her courage. "Don't . . . . don't think such thoughts, cow-person. Don't make me hurt you. Ellen! Come out, Ellen, and prompt this heavy. I'm scared he'll steal the scene."

A light step. From an adjoining room came a tall, slender, denim-clad girl. There were circles about her purple-hazed eyes and she looked tired. But her lips were tight and her carbine was level, cocked and ready. A carbine familiar to Hoss.

"Ah-ha!" The cowman punched his iron. "The bell-ringing ghost that steals men's rifles. Lady, I'm obliged for some timely and straight shooting last night."

"Not Ellen, Mister Beef Baron," said the redhead. "She's been sheltered where killing is something denied by the Commandants. I've been selling her on the dog-eat-dog idea, with the Devil taking the vegetarians. Your applause is sweet and Penny will take the bow. Somebody's got to look after Ellen's interests. Having accepted the part, I'll take my cues till the curtain call."

Hoss chuckled at this spice of the footlights. "Lady," he said. "You're plainly an actress trying to make an act out of life. Is it to Ellen's interests to drag her here to face a pack of human coyotes?"

"Drag her?" Penny laughed. "She dragged me, Mister Hotspur. The loving aunt she's bossed since cradle days. Her interests are under our feet, where her dad took out the millions he squandered in Wall Street."

Hoss started. "Tanner?"

"Preston Tanner's daughter—Ellen. All of us had forgotten the Hobbled Mule until one Gaddis Lupton came east to try to strongarm a quit-claim from Ellen. Our lawyer judged we had rights if we could secure possession. You, Mister Beefsteak Tycoon, are three months too late to clinch your tax title, thanks to the help of. . . ."

"A moon-eyed calf-'rangler, ma'am, who fell fer a purty face, which I don't blame him. Young lady, my rights are yores. Archie, come out from hidin' an' resign yore cow-nursin' job honorable, before I fire yuh."

"A pretty speech, Greer-man." Penny beamed upon him. "And I'll try to rise to your act. Speaking for my niece, I offer an undivided fourth of Hobbled Mule—if you'll fight for it."

"Fight?" Hoss grinned. "That's my middlen ame, eh, Archie?"

The Teepee foreman, appearing in a connecting doorway, nodded sheepishly. "I'd uh told yuh, Hoss," he mumbled, "only I thought mebby you'd get mad at . . . . at. . . ." His eyes went to the girl who was shy before him.

"I savvy," grunted Hoss, and stiffened—listening. "Our friends start to disturb the ghosts of Porphyry Butte."

A heavy-voiced command was echoing through the town: "Scatter out, you gun-throwing sons! You split ten thousand if you rub 'em out before daybreak. Rake the walls with lead. If that don't smoke 'em out, use a torch, fire this tinder."

"Lupton," gritted Penny. "The same voice, the same rage he brought east to browbeat Ellen. He's offering ten times for our lives what he offered for the mine."

"Nice neighbor," growled Hoss, then snapped: "Down. Their bullets will sieve this place like a bat through a moonbeam. Down."

"Back!" countermanded Penny. "This is the old mine office. It backs up to a mine entrance. Come on."

She led the way through deepening gloom. Outside the first rifle thundered, the slug slashing through the front and angling out the side. Gunfire rose to an ever quickening storm of detonations, a smashing, tearing sleet of lead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hot Lead Fodder for the Hobbled Mule

AT THE rear of the building, for the moment beyond the reach of renegade lead, Archie lit a lantern. Penny threw open a door and a gust of damp, musty air hit their faces. The door gave directly into the hillside, against which the building backed. Ahead reached a cold corridor that presently eld into a vaulted chamber where water seeped, and was ditched into a drain along the tunnel wall.

The stopping here ascended sharply toward the open hillside, and up its irregular steps they clambered toward its jagged

ceiling. At the top, Penny led the way into a small tunnel. Light showed faintly ahead. Where the tunnel broke out of the hill, its mouth was covered by a lush growth of sumac. At first glance, Hoss knew what this tunnel was. Here, in the palmy days, a rifle guard had watched the offices, against the forays of lawless-minded men.

The afterglow was fading fast and soon it would be dark enough to spot the gun flashes, and the coverts of the murderous Lupton gun hirelings. And while they awaited darkness, they talked over a plan of action. They were four and there were at least twenty against them. The women insisted on doing their part, so it was agreed they would hold down the tunnel mouth, retreating deeper into its belly in case the entrance was discovered by somebody who did not give the password "Lupton", a name sure not to be spoken by his hirelings.

Archie volunteered to hunt cover to the right of the entrance, Hoss to the left. Archie went down and brought up a sack heavy with ammunition. They had several hundred rounds, yet Hoss argued for slow, deliberate firing, taking time to ferret out the target and giving the renegades little chance to locate them. And so night came to Porphyry Butte, with the roar and smash of rifle fire contriving to make the darkness hideous.

The lantern was out and they could not see faces as they shook hands all around. But Hoss read more in those handclasps than he could have in faces. Ellen was trembling, frightened, yet desperately determined to fight to the bitter end for what she considered her only heritage from a wastrel father she could barely remember.

There was an eagerness in Archie's handshake that suggested less concern regarding the coming test than gratitude that Hoss had not been difficult about his deception. But it remained for Penny to prove the expressiveness of gripping hands. She took his big, gnarled hand in both her chubby ones, clung to them with a fierce exaltation.

"Curtain's about to go up, pardner," she whispered. "Hope I don't forget my lines. If I miss my cue . . . . well, it's been fine just knowing a man that isn't the least bit afraid of danger. Hope we . . . . we lay 'em in the aisles, Mister Cowman."

There was something so feminine about her, something that seemed to add an inch to Hoss' stature.

Hoss chuckled mirthlessly when they had parted and he was feeling his way among the rocks, in the blackness that precedes moonrise.

"Like hell I'm not scairt," he muttered. "This hillside ain't slated to be no Sunday school picnic."

Then, within a rod, he made out a dim, kneeling figure and croaked: "Hey!"

The gunman whirled: "Who's that?"

Hoss said: "A ghost," icily, and shot him dead. A moment later he was moving through deep shadows toward the street, where Lupton was bawling a stop order.

"Silence! Quit firing!" A hush fell. "You, Greer! You and your mates have five minutes to choose between surrender or fire. Not a second more."

"Five seconds is enough!" That was Penny. Her voice seemed to come from the mine office, but Hoss gave her credit for better sense and gave ear to Lupton's savage judgment.

"Throwing your chance away, eh? All right, fools. Mac, take two boys and move the ponies back. The rest of you fire these crummy shacks. Burn 'em down. Wipe the slate clean and rub out their chalk marks!"

Stealthily Hoss moved toward that voice, hearing the slogging boots as they leaped to his orders. Hoss was halfway to the street, between two leaning walls, when that low, desperate challenge came:

"Fill your hand, Lupton!"

"Archie!" Rough breath gusted from Hoss. A cry. Lupton's satisfied, "Nice work, Riley. It's Bunch, Greer's Teepee foreman. Not dead, eh? Good. Fetch him in here, where he won't see the bonfire till it smashes in on him. Hurry."

Pressed against a wall, Hoss felt Lupton's tread shake the building. A rod away was a paneless window and Hoss went through it. A thumbed match showed he was in a littered ancient barrel room. He crossed it before the match died, pausing at a door showing cracks of lantern light. Thinking of rusty hinges, Hoss worked slowly, lifting, pressing outward. . . .

The panel gave, complainingly, slowly

edging open till Hoss could see into the dilapidated barroom. A lantern, on the dusty bar, lighted Lupton and Rossiter as they tied Archie's hands behind him with his neck scarf, knotting it then to the tarnished top bar-rail. Archie hung there, white and limp and sick.

THE sight fanned Hoss's rage into swift flame. Discarding caution, he kicked the panel in and ripped at the renegade pair. "Injun business comes high, Lupton. You an' Rossiter start payin' now!"

Before they spun to glimpse his charge, his deadly purpose was plain to them. Their draw was for life, and they knew it. Lupton, faster than Rossiter, whipped his gun out and up. Cocking it was his last conscious act. Fire lanced from Hoss' thigh, smashing Lupton back. Strength held him up. Reflex sent his slug into the floor. A vengeful cry ripped from him and he fell.

What should have discouraged Rossiter only filled him with fearful desperation. He drew, swung the old fashioned "lift" and was throwing down when Hoss shot him. Light winked from his eyes. He moaned, dropped his pistol, and sank to the floor.

A man came smashing through the shaky swing doors. "You all right, Lup—?" He fell silent, eyes big, round, unbelieving. Rallying, he clipped out a curse, leveled the carbine. Hoss dropped him across the threshold and caught up his saddle gun as he flashed outside. He was a killer now, mouth a grim slash, eyes pinpoints of vengefulness. Every inch the ravening wolf his enemies pegged him.

Flames were already licking hungrily at tinder-dry walls, lighting the street where gunmen came at a fast run, their guns drawn, profane queries spilling across their curled lips. Hoss took it in at a glance, and his brief breather was over. This was what he had waited for. He knelt, leveled the carbine and aimed. At his first shot, a man faltered in swift stride, leaped high, shrilled a death scream and died. A renegade, quartering from out the deep shade of a teetering awning, offered greater risk than the rest, and Hoss chose him. But before he could fire the man reeled dizzily and spilled.

That astounded Hoss until he saw the two women in the doorway of the church, both firing. Hoss wailed an order for them to take cover and really heated the barrel of that .30-30. Caught in a crossfire of death, such renegades as didn't go down drew up, fiddle-footed a moment and then bolted with yells of fear.

A bullet wailed past Hoss and he spun to find himself flanked by the trio who had led the renegade horses away. A slug clipped his hat. Another splintered the walk, stinging his face. Raging, Hoss emptied his magazine, then went to his holster, downing one and scattering the others.

The flank attack rallied the others, who returned to battle, holding cover and spraying lead at Hoss and the women in the church. In flame-glow, grown bright as sunlight, the leaderless renegades might have staged a wipeout except that they heard, as Hoss heard, that thin, wild, ribald yell striking through gunfire and holocaust.

Wind, whirling smoke down the embattled street, seemed to blow in a reckless cavalcade, shooting as it spurred. Chunky Gil Pastime in the lead, howling his Bellclapper boys to wipe the slate clean. Lead whined along the street. Gunblasts caromed off the smoke-wreathed fronts. Hoofbeats roared high, then diminished as the cowboys chased the lawless Lupton hirelings out.

Hoss, a prideful smile on his lips, reloaded his cutter and went inside for Archie. The youngster had rallied and the terror of smoke made him forget pain as he struggled with his bonds. Hoss freed him, made sure he could locomote and sent him toward the open. Then he sought the church, where the bell tolled mournfully.

Hoss found Ellen weeping hysterically, Penny pulling at the bell cord. "Coo-coo," he muttered. "The weaker vessel ain't built to stand gunplay."

"Weaker vessel, my Aunt Minnie!" snapped Penny. "We put over our act without calling on big, rough man. I toll the bell for a dying town. It's sad, Mister Hoss."

"Sad," agreed Hoss, "fer centerpeeds, scorpeens, triantlers an' vinegaroons. Otherwise, Porphyry Butte's bin dead twenty-five years an' is now gettin' decent cremation of its bleached bones. Which we'll get the same if we don't stir a dust."

"I can't go," wailed Ellen. "Archie's disappeared. I'm afraid he's. . . ."

"Dead?" demanded Hoss. "You can't kill that hairpin. Hurry yonder. . ." he pointed, "an' you'll find him hipperin' down street, nursin' a bullet scratch. He'll be needin' some sympathy, ma'am." And he smiled as Ellen gasped, ran outside. Penny came to him then, staring up into his dusty, stubbled face.

"A gentleman," she scolded, "would shed a tear for a woman losing her ramshackle humble home. But, alas, no tear. How—" she pressed her face against his chest, sobbing "—can we hold possession with no . . . . no place to stay?"

"Pshaw, Miss Penny," Hoss embraced her awkwardly. "Don't you carry on an' don't worry. Nobody's left to contest your rights, but me. An' I'm yore pard."

"Lupton?" She asked, lifting her face.

"A stroke," he murmured. "Him an' Rossiter was took sudden. Now, about yore comfort, I'd admire if you was to make my Tres Alamos home till we get a power contract an' pumps installed an' ore rolling."

"Any strings on that, Mister Hoss?" Her purple eyes were dancing.

"One," he chuckled. "Hung Soon, my Chinee cook, needs a woman's discipline. The blasted heathen's lazy an' insolent an' I lack the proper touch."

"A pleasure," she laughed, "to play Simon Legree. Lead me to him."

Under a sky vivid with flame and sparks, they moved down the smoky street. Behind them Porphyry Butte was dying as all ghost towns die—by fire. Ahead, Ellen stood holding Archie, dabbing at his creased skull with a tiny handkerchief. Gil and his men were riding back with the renegade horses. In the east, a rising moon smiled wearily at the pitifully transient man-made glow in long-dark Porphyry Butte.

THE END

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CHAPTER ONE

Outcast Cowman

DALE LANGTRY had miscalled the turn. He could see that the moment he topped the rise and rode his bay down the rocky slant toward

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the Figure 8 headquarters under the spreading live oaks. For this wasn't an invite to visit with Martha Russell on the day she'd returned from school back East.

He couldn't tell yet just what it was, but it couldn't be that. There were too many saddled horses standing slack-hipped along the hitch rail. There were too many booted and spurred riders grouped on the front gallery or hunkered down in the shade. There was too much of a tense expectancy about the place.

The realization made him a little sick and he cussed himself for a fool. Martha Russell hadn't written him a letter in over a year now. Not since he'd told her he aimed to stick with that little old greasy-sack cow-spread of his out on the South Llano. She'd wanted him to cage himself in old Irv Russell's bank as a clerk—make a town man out of himself.

They'd pulled a big argument about that, worn it down to a draw, and called it off, unsettled. That's when he'd crossed her off in his tally book and put her out of his mind.

Or that's what he'd thought.

But today that Spur rider had come by with the information that he was wanted at the Figure 8. The rider hadn't enlarged upon the news and Dale Langtry had been too startled and pleased at what he thought was an invitation from the girl to ask questions. Tickled as a patch-seated kid with a new red wagon, he'd shaved and bathed and come at a high lope.

"Love-sick as a spotted heifer," he told himself with a grin.

He eased his bay off into the wagon road that led to the house. He felt foolish, riding in all dressed up like this. At the same time, he was disturbed at the gathering of Llano River ranchers and what it might portend.

He rode up to where a group of cowhands squatted on their spurs out from the house apiece. Hopper Taylor, a stoop-shouldered little old peeler for the Spur outfit came to his feet with a wide grin.

"That's him," Hopper said to the bunch. "That's the bird that lets a jug-head bronc throw him so far under a corral gate I have to lift the thing off its hinges to git his head out. And yet then he claims he can't use a rider!"

Hopper Taylor slapped his leg in uproarious mirth and the rest of the bunch whooped.

Dale Langtry grinned sheepishly. "Howdy, Hooper," he greeted, then motioned to the ranchers gathered on the gallery. "What's in the wind?"

Hopper Taylor's face sobered instantly. "Damned if I know, Dale," he said. "They're close-mouthed about it. But from the best us boys can gather, they're sure fixing to make a big medicine. Find out and tell us. We got an itch to know."

"From where I set," observed Ty Akker with a sly grin, "it looks like Dale has it figured for a preachin' or a kissin' party. Look at thet b'iled shirt and the taller on them boots. Sprinkle a little smelling water in his hair and be dogged if the gals won't be hammerin' on his doorstep come midnight, cryin' to be let in."

★

RIDERS in the forks of the Llanos liked this tall Dale Langtry. They liked his slow, easy grin, his mild blue eyes, his quick appreciation for any small favor shown him. They liked the plain guts it had taken for him to quit the security of a good job and start himself a little old shirt-tail spread of his own. Start it and hang with it. And they showed their liking and respect by rawhiding him every chance they got. That was their way of letting him know that he was one of the bunch.

He took time to hand out a little hoorawing of his own brand, shook hands all around, then stalked toward the ranchers on the gallery.

Grizzled, lean-flanked old Irv Russell, owner of the Figure 8, met him at the steps and stuck out a hand in greeting.

"What's in the pot, Irv?" the young rancher questioned.

"Plenty," snapped Irv Russell. "We'll wait, though, till old Wiley Rex and Harve Dillon show up before we spill it. It's too bad to tell more'n one time. Head for the kitchen if you're hungry as common. There's barbecue and bear sign for the taking. Hot coffee on the stove."

Dale Langtry looked down the long gallery toward the kitchen.

Henry Wilder, rawboned, hard-jawed

owner of the Spur was there. So was short, ruddy-faced Bill Fikes who ran an outfit over on Dove Creek. Lean, hungry-looking old Ples Thompson, with his ludicrous nose. Farther down was Mark Nunn, owner of the Mill Iron ranch and his younger partner, Ben Corder.

Mark Nunn was medium-sized, gray-haired with a thin, shrewd, predatory-looking face. His partner was slightly swarthy, with sleek black hair, bold eyes and a mouth cut about the corners with lines of fast, hard living.

Dale Langtry shook hands with the first group. He merely nodded curtly at the Mill Iron owners as he walked past them. They nodded at him, equally formal.

Two people were in the kitchen. One was old Coffee Smith, hipshot and crabby, forking doughnuts out of a kettle of smoking grease. The other was Martha Russell.

Dale Langtry stopped in the doorway and caught his breath. Martha Russell seemed more slender and beautiful than ever, standing there in starched gingham and making room on the table for the new batch of doughnuts.

For a wild second, Dale Langtry hoped that after all, maybe the girl had sent for him. Then she turned and saw him and said, "Oh, hello, Dale!" and he wanted to cuss himself again. That voice had been too cool and impersonal. It didn't mean anything.

Dale Langtry said dryly: "They tell me this is where a man comes to fight off starvation. How about it, Coffee!"

Coffee Smith twisted his head and glared at the newcomer. The old pot-wrangler packed a perpetual grudge against all riders with appetites, and he wasn't bashful about showing it.

"Have at it!" he snapped. "If you don't git it, the next 'un will. Damned if they'll let it lay on the table long enough to cool!"

He turned to his frying and Dale Langtry grinned. Martha Russell handed him coffee and doughnuts and said quietly: "How are you, Dale?"

Behind him, Ben Corder swaggered into the room. The girl didn't wait to get Dale Langtry's answer, but turned and greeted the newcomer with a warm smile. Dale Langtry's appetite left him. Carefully, he put down his cup of coffee untouched, and laid the doughnuts beside it.

"Much obliged, Coffee," he said and walked out. He felt a little sick again.

Wiley Rex and Harve Dillon had ridden up now and were swinging down out of their saddles. Wiley Rex was a wiry little man, wrinkled and sun-dried as a piece of old cowhide, but there was a lot of snap and fire in his little puckered blue eyes. Harve Dillon was thin, slightly humped, with a long, sad face and pale fearful watery eyes.

The two of them came onto the gallery. Old Irv Russell greeted them and then turned to the others.

"I reckon we can git down to cases now," he said. "Called you men in to tell you that Thad Carmichael's back in the country. Holed up in that rustler hangout the other side of Seven Hundred Springs. That ought to give you something to gnaw on!"

It did. They stood there on the gallery, too stunned for a moment to speak. Then Harve Dillon exclaimed in a high, shrill voice, "Thad Carmichael! My Gawd, men. That means trouble!"

"Plenty of trouble!" agreed Irv Russell. "And he's done served notice!"

"Served notice!" snapped Wiley Rex. "On who?"

"On Mark Nunn and Ben Corder. Thad and his bunch rode past the Mill Iron last night hollerin' and shootin'. They throwed a rock through a winder. Had a note wropped around it, signed by Thad Carmichael.

It told Mark and Ben to clear out. Claimed they was done. Claimed he aimed to run Mark and Ben out of the country if he had to wipe out every outfit in the forks of the Llanos to git the job done! You know what that'll add up to!"

"Can't say that I do," spoke up old Wiley Rex mildly. "Just what the hell does it add up to?"

"It means," said Irv Russell bluntly, "that there's a killer wolf loose in the forks of the Llanos. It means we all have got to git together and whip it out of the country."

"But you said Carmichael give notice to the Mill Iron," Wiley Rex pointed out. "Where does the balance of us come in?"

Irv Russell wheeled on old Wiley Rex impatiently. "Don't be a confounded fool,

Wiley! Thad Carmichael's an outlaw and a killer. The John Laws has been trying to run him to ground along the Nueces River for the last ten or twelve year. Reckon they've finally run him out. So now he's back on his old stomping grounds, trying for a foothold.

"Let him git it, and you think he'll just stop with one outfit? Hell, he'll hog all the range between the Llanos! He's bound to have a big pack of gun-dogs backing his play or he never would have threatened the Mill Iron. That's how come I called this meeting. We got to form us a cattleman's association to stand agin him. What I want to know is who'll throw in with us agin Thad Carmichael and his wild bunch?"

★

IRV RUSSELL looked at Bill Fikes. The red-faced rancher shrugged. "What I've got ain't much," he said. "But it represents a lifetime of hard work and I'll fight to keep it. I can't whip Thad Carmichael and his bunch in a lone fight. Count me in."

"Fine!" said Irv Russell. "You got a head on your shoulders, Bill. How about you, Henry?"

Henry Wilder nodded. "I'm in," he said.

"I want to sign up," said Harve Dillon nervously. He was plainly frightened at what lay before them.

"Ben ain't here right now," spoke up Mark Nunn. "But I'll speak for him. We think it's the best thing that can be done."

"I'd a-bet on that!" said old Wiley Rex dryly, "seein' as how it's your hide Carmichael aims to peg down, Mark. But me, I'd druther be a little more sure for certain what Carmichael's got on his mind before I jump him and his wolf pack. Maybe it's like Carmichael said in his note. Maybe he ain't after all us fellers."

Old Irv Russell's quick temper got the upper hand. "What the hell!" he lashed out at Wiley Rex. "This is all open range, ain't it? You figure Carmichael will stop to read the brands and cut out everything but Mill Iron stuff when he makes a cow steal? Dammit, Wiley! A cow's a cow to a cow thief. What does he care about what iron she's wearing?"

Wiley Rex nodded. "Maybe you're right," he said calmly. "And then maybe agin you ain't. I'll mull her over. But don't try to stompede me into nothing, Irv. I been used to killin' my own snakes and lettin' the other feller kill his. When Carmichael shows me he's out to trim my range—or yours—same as he is the Mill Iron, then maybe we'll talk turkey. But like she lays at present, I don't figure I owe Mark Nunn and Ben Corder a damn thing!"

Dale Langtry grinned at the look of murderous hate that flashed into Mark Nunn's eyes at this last. Cagey old Wiley Rex had reminded the crowd of something Mark Nunn would rather they had forgotten.

"Do as you please, Wiley," Irv Russell said irritably. "But looks to me like you're way off in your calculations." He turned to Dale Langtry. "You willing to join, Dale?"

Dale Langtry shook his head. "I've got no quarrel with Carmichael," he said. "I don't aim to have as long as he don't hit at anybody he don't feel he's got a right to. When he starts spreading his loop too wide, there'll still be time."

A harsh, jeering laugh interrupted him. Ben Corder had come around outside and stepped up on the gallery. "Thad Carmichael's got a half-sister living with some nesters down on Johnson's Fork," he sneered. "You can't expect a man that's sparkin' her to buck her brother!"

Dale Langtry didn't know he could move so fast. He was across the gallery and had Ben Corder knocked flat of his back out in the yard before the man could draw a gun.

Ben Corder came up on his all-fours, his battered lips bleeding, his sleek greased hair dust-streaked and falling down over his hate-filled eyes. He reached back, clawing again for his gun.

This time he got it. But Dale Langtry was on him again. He kicked the gun out of the man's hand. Then he grabbed Ben Corder's long hair and yanked him to his feet. A solid right into Ben Corder's belly bent him over with a grunt. A smashing left up under his chin straightened him, rocked him backwards, off balance. Dale Langtry hit him again and then went to the ground with him, beat-

ing the man's face with uncontrollable rage.

Irv Russell got hold of him first, but couldn't drag him loose.

"Get away, Irv! Let me alone," Dale Langtry cried. "I'll fix the snake till he can't never tell another lie!"

It took Bill Fikes and Irv Russell and a couple of others to tear the raging young rancher loose from Ben Corder. They backed Dale Langtry against the house and held him there, struggling and crying with helpless rage. Ben Corder lay where he had fallen, wallowing and moaning.

Mark Nunn ran down the steps and lifted Ben Corder's battered head. Behind him came Martha Russell. She dropped beside the fallen man and took his limp head in her lap.

Sight of her stopped Dale Langtry cold. The tearing rage inside him quieted, his muscles relaxed. He felt suddenly ashamed.

"All right," he said hoarsely to the men holding him. "We'll let it go at that—now!"

They released him. He stepped down upon the gallery and got his hat and put it on his head. Then he headed for the hitching rail, without looking to one side or the other.

Martha Russell looked up at him as he passed. She spoke in a whisper, but it was clear and distinct to him, and contemptuous: "You brutal, savage beast!" Her pretty face was flushed with anger.

He checked his stride abruptly and stared down at her till he saw her eyes widen with sudden fright and the blood drain out of her cheeks. Then he laughed harshly and walked on to his horse.

A moment later, he'd hooked spurs to the bay and was hitting for his cedar-pole cabin on the South Llano at a faster pace than he'd come.

CHAPTER TWO

Renegade's Home-Coming

HOPPER TAYLOR was riding a half-broken bronc with a hackamore and he came close to running the young jug-head off its feet before he caught up with Dale Langtry.

"If you're aimin' to kill that-there horse," he shouted, "use a six-shooter. There ain't no sense in running the pore devil to death!"

Dale Langtry swore and hauled the running bay down. "Hopper," he said savagely, "I'm the biggest damn' fool in the forks of the Llanos."

"Sure!" agreed Hopper Taylor. "Ain't I told you that plenty of times? But what happened? One minute, you're hoorawin' a bunch of us boys. The next, you've done beat hell out of Ben Corder and windbroke a good horse. I ain't curious, you understand, but I'd listen, in case you're horsin' to talk!"

Dale Langtry told him and added with a short laugh: "And then *she* had to turn out and hold his damn head and tell me what a savage brute I turned out to be!"

Hopper Taylor chewed at one corner of his wide mouth to hold off a grin. He rode silently for a moment. Then he pulled up on his blowing bronc and hauled it around. "Come on," he invited. "We're heading for town. What you need is a sweetener!"

Dale Langtry halted the bay and a slow grin began to smooth the harsh lines from his face.

"You buying?" he wanted to know.

Hopper Taylor looked crestfallen. "If you're the kind," he complained, "that'll drink whiskey off'n a pore devil fresh out of a job, I reckon I can do the buying."

Dale Langtry's eyebrows lifted. "Howcome? I thought you were taking up the slack in the salty ones for Henry Wilder."

"I was. But that was before I won a bet off myself yesterday."

"A bet?"

"Yeah," said Hopper Taylor, eager to tell it. "I bet myself I could drag the paw and beller out of Henry's ramrod. And I won 'er."

"You're bragging," said Dale Langtry. "Rod Sanders'll make two of you."

"Sure I'm bragging," said Hopper Taylor. "Why not? I crawled that loudmouth thing's hump, whittled him down to my size, and cleaned his plows. I got a right to brag."

"And old Henry give you your walking papers for that?"

"Henry Wilder," said Hopper Taylor, "thinks Rod Sanders is something on the big end of a stick. He don't like for any

of us little fellers to pick on Rod Sanders."

All the tension was gone out of Dale Langtry now. He laughed and swung his horse around. "If you can show me a mark on Rod Sanders' face," he said, "I'll buy the drinks."

"If he's in town," said Hopper Taylor, "I'll show you what a man looks like when he's just shook hands with a wildcat. You ain't the only scrapper in these here parts."

On the way to town, Dale Langtry told the braggy little old bronc-twister about Thad Carmichael and his warning to the owners of the Mill Iron.

"Mark Nunn and Ben Corder's daddy run the Carmichaels off the Mill Iron fifteen years ago," he said. "They made an outlaw out of Thad. Now Thad comes back, hell-bent to even up, and Mark Nunn and Ben Corder figure to drag the rest of us into Thad's private war. Me, I can't see the percentage."

Hopper Taylor nodded. "Let 'em comb the burrs outta their own tails," he agreed. "Damned if I lose any sleep over it."

They rode quietly for a moment, with Hopper Taylor studying the younger man with calculating eyes.

"I ain't curious, you understand," he probed cautiously, "but what about the Carmichael gal?"

"She was a baby by old Dobe Carmichael's second woman when Mark Nunn and old Ike Corder run the Carmichaels out of the country. Old Dobe died with a bullet in his back. His woman went back to her nester folks out on Johnson's Fork. She died a couple of years later with a fever. Nina growed up on a hard-scrabble dry-land farm, like the rest of the nesters."

"I knowed all that," said Hopper Taylor impatiently. "What I mean is, what about you and her?"

He saw Dale Langtry's body tense with sudden anger and he was quick to take backwater. "Now, hold on a minute," he pleaded. "I ain't no gossipy old woman. I just asked."

"The hell you're not!" flared Dale Langtry. "Damned if I hadn't just as soon holler everything I know from a tree stump as tell it to you. Well, put this down in your tally book:

"There ain't a thing to tell about me and Nina Carmichael. I caught Ben Corder in Junction one night with the girl hemmed up in an alley and pawing her around. She was crying and trying to get loose. I kicked Ben Corder's tail bone a foot up his back and told him I'd beat him half to death if I ever heard of his fooling with the kid again. And that's all there is to it."

Hopper Taylor said dryly, "I wouldn't put no heavy bet on that!"

"What d'you mean?"

Hopper Taylor ignored the question. "Did you ever see that little thing purtied up in a dress, with ribbins in her hair?" he asked.

Dale Langtry jerked his head around to stare at the little old stoop-shouldered rider. "No," he said. "Why?"

"Well, I'd like to bet a quart of drinking whiskey she wouldn't need no four years of back-East book-learning to show up in 'em like a new dollar in a mud-hole."

It was Dale Langtry's time to ride silent for awhile. Finally, he said, "I reckon we both need a drink."

Hopper Taylor grinned. "Ain't it a fact?" he agreed.

★

THE town of Junction lay in the forks of the North and South Llano Rivers, the sprawling buildings amply shaded by towering pecan trees, burr-oaks, live oaks and monstrous elms. A ragged line of ceniza and catclaw hills formed the third side of the triangular valley.

The two riders swung down in front of Tom Ball's saloon and went inside. The place was empty, except for the gloomy Tom Ball standing behind his polished bar and a stumpy cowboy sleeping off a drunk on a cot behind the poker tables.

"Set out a bottle, Tom," ordered Hopper Taylor. "Dale's bile is spilling over and he needs a good sweetener."

"I don't reckon," the pot-bellied Tom Ball said dolefully, "that your complaints are giving enough trouble for a drink."

"No," said Hopper Taylor. "But Dale's buying, so I'll load up to fight off any ailments that might show up later."

They were taking the third drink when two riders pushed through the batwing

doors and came clanking toward the bar. One was Rod Sanders, ramrod for the Spur outfit. He was a big heavy man with red jowls and eyes that stood too far out of their sockets. One of those eyes was purple and swollen now and the thick lips were battered and puffy. His big nose was one raw, skinless sore.

The second man was a swarthy, lanky rider, with a hatchet face, coarse black hair and yellow-brown eyes. This was Gringo Lorenzo, a half-breed Mexican rider for the Mill Iron.

Hopper Taylor waved a whiskey glass at Rod Sanders and said proudly: "Didn't I tell you, Dale? Now ain't he a purty sight? Look where I gnawed the hide off that big nose!"

Dale Langtry paused a moment outside the saloon, then led the little bronc rider toward Sod Mercer's general merchandise store. Inside, he asked to look at a couple of new .45-70 Winchester rifles.

The storekeeper handed a pair across the counter. "That's the fourth one of them rifles I've sold today," he said. "What's stirring?"

"There's coyotes in the brush," said Dale Langtry. He jacked open the breech of a rifle, then examined the cartridges.

"Well, them guns'll reach out yonder and lay 'em down," said Sod Mercer. "They'll pack lead close to a thousand yards."

If you like the thread of romance woven about Dale and Nina in this hell-for-leather Texas yarn, you'll go all-out for our companion magazine RANGELAND ROMANCES. Take a look-see at "The Angel With Silver Guns," by Art Lawson in the current issue—on sale TODAY!

Rod Sanders' snarl cracked a battered lip and he cursed hoarsely. "When the sign's right, Taylor, I'll show you how to jump a man when he ain't lookin'!"

Hopper Taylor set his glass back on the bar and stepped quickly toward the big Spur ramrod. "If you ain't satisfied, Rod, what's wrong with the sign now?" He was licking his lips with eagerness.

"There it goes agin," said Tom Ball plaintively. "Every time I buy a new piece of barroom furniture, somebody wants to break it up into stovewood. Why'n the hell can't you boys ever take it outside."

Dale Langtry followed Hopper Taylor, reached out and caught him by the elbow. "You win," he said. "I'm paying for 'em. You don't have to prove it on him all over again."

Rod Sanders had backed off, a hint of fear showing in his good eye. Hopper Taylor let Dale Langtry lead him out of the saloon, but he was complaining.

"I was aimin'," he said peevishly, "to bite a swaller-fork in one of them beet-red ears."

"We'll take 'em both," said Dale Langtry. "And plenty of shells."

He handed a rifle to Hopper Taylor. "You don't know it," Dale Langtry said, "but you got a job, Hopper. Dunno what the wages'll be yet, but there'll be plenty of whiskey money."

Hopper Taylor sobered. "Hell, you don't have to hire me just because Henry Wilder fired my tail. I can make out!"

"Yeah, but I can't make out," said Dale Langtry. "The way things is shaping up, there's liable to be hell among the yearlings here in the forks of the rivers for a spell. You'll earn more wages than I can ever pay you!"

The gratefulness in Hopper Taylor's eyes made Dale Langtry look away. Hopper Taylor was barely forty, but old for a bronc-buster. Mighty old. And while he'd kept it well covered, getting fired off the Spur had been a nerve-shattering blow to a stove-up rider of his age.

He shoved cartridges into the magazine of the new rifle to hide his emotion. "We'll eat," he said, "as long as we can buy shells for these new guns."

They met Wiley Rex outside the store. "Henry Wilder's looking for you," he told Hopper Taylor. "He says your job's open for you on the Spur again."

Hopper Taylor's little rawhide body straightened. "You tell Henry Wilder he can go to hell," he said indignantly. "You tell him here's one peeler what don't backtrack!"

"Hold on," said Dale Langtry. "Henry's a good man to work for, Hopper. And he can pay better wages than you'll ever draw from me!"

Hopper Taylor snorted. "You said I'd earn mine, didn't you?" he asked belligerently.

"You'll earn 'em," said Dale Langtry.

"All right, by Gawd, I'll earn 'em!" he said with finality. "If it ain't doing nothing all day long but lifting gates off your damned neck after some fool bronc snaps you out of a saddle."

Wiley Rex grinned and winked at Dale Langtry. He eyed the new rifles. "Looks like you boys are putting on your war paint," he observed.

Dale Langtry said: "Did they form their association?"

"Yeah. An' elected Irv Russell the head of it," Wiley Rex told him.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exploded Dale Langtry. "Didn't think Irv was that big a fool."

"Mark Nunn's work," asserted Wiley Rex. "Mark can wrangle words like a jackleg lawyer. Sold old Irv a bill of goods he's liable to have a time paying for. Got him and the others to where Thad Carmichael will have to stomp all over 'em to git at the Mill Iron. Tried to tell Irv, but the hot-headed old fool wouldn't listen."

He paused and grinned. "They got Ben Corder in bed with a busted jaw and have sent off for a special nurse. What'd you hit him with—a pole axe?"

"There's some scissorbills in the forks of the river here," observed Hopper Taylor importantly, "that'll l'arn not to run off at the head when me'n Dale Langtry's around."

DALE LANGTRY'S little two-bit outfit lay mostly in a wide-sweeping bend of the South Llano. The couple or three hundred acres of valley land against the river were good grazing. The rest reached back into cedar-brake hills, where, as Hopper Taylor put it, "It'd crowd a possum to find enough grass for a bed."

However, by supplementing his cows by Angora goats that he ran back in the hills and hogs that did well on the pecans and acorns along the river, Dale Langtry was sitting pretty as a rancher, so long as he didn't try to spread out too much.

He'd built a good two-room cedar-pole cabin on the bank of the river and all the corrals and chutes and dipping vats a man needs to run an outfit single-handed. Seven years of hardship and heartache and sweat had gone into building that little spread. And now at thirty, he was proud of it, as only a man can be proud when he's started with nothing but his bare hands and built up something he's wanted all his life. All it lacked now was a woman to make a home of it.

When he thought of that, Dale Langtry's face became craggy. He kept seeing Martha Russell running out to cradle Ben Corder's head in her lap. He kept hearing her contemptuous whisper as he'd walked past her. He cursed the memory, but Martha Russell had been a dream of his too long for him to keep such thoughts crowded out of his mind.

He and Hopper Taylor rode in at sundown, both a little drunk from nibbling at a bottle Hopper had managed to get hold of before they left town.

"Just checking on my wage account a little," he grinned at Dale Langtry when he'd produced the bottle.

The young rancher had a couple of wormy calves in the big corral and he told Hopper Taylor they'd doctor them before they ate supper. Hopper roped a calf, threw and held the bawling creature down while Dale worked on it.

They had the second calf down when a horseman rode up out of the river on a big roan stud and halted in front of the corral gate.

He was a tall man, sitting long in a Mexican-built saddle. He wore goat-hide chaps decorated with big conchas of hammered silver. His shirt was black silk and the two silver-chased six-shooters at his belt had black handles. Cold gray eyes

stared out from under a flat-crowned, narrow-brimmed hat.

"Howdy, gents!" he said quietly.

Hopper Taylor stared, but Dale Langtry recognized the man instantly. "Howdy, Carmichael," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Dale Rides the Bushwhack Trail

THAD CARMICHAEL'S thin-lipped mouth hinted of a smile. "You got a good memory, Langtry," he said. "Been clost to fifteen year since we wolf-hunted together, ain't it? Didn't figure you'd recollect me."

"I heard you were at Seven Hundred Springs," said Dale Langtry.

Carmichael's bony face hardened. "Nunn scattered the news and started squalling for help, did he?" Then he laughed harshly. He dragged out a sack of tobacco. He twisted up a smoke and lit it unlicked, Mexican style, before he said: "He better tuck his tail and head for the tall timbers. I come to git him, Langtry. Him and old Ike Corder's pup, Ben."

Dale Langtry felt a chill run up his spine at the cold hard finality in the voice of this man with whom he'd wolf-hunted as a boy. He built himself a smoke.

"Thad," he said, "I can't blame you for anything you do to Mark Nunn and Ben Corder. But had you ever considered the grief you're liable to load onto people who never done you harm?"

"Them that keep out of my way," said Thad Carmichael thinly, "has got no call for worriment. Them that throw in with the Mill Iron bunch will git bad hurt. I'm out to git Mark Nunn and Ben Corder. And come hell or high water, I aim to git 'em!"

Dale Langtry studied the hard face of his boyhood friend for a long moment. "It's none of my business, Thad," he said, "but what can you do with the Mill Iron, once you get it? You don't figure you can stay on it, do you?"

Lines of bitterness grew deeper in the outlaw's face. "No," he said. "There's a price on my head. I can't stay anywhere long. I got Mark Nunn and Ben Corder's daddy to thank for that. But I got a kid sister. You know her. She got robbed of her rights, same as me. I'm turning the Mill Iron over to her when I git it. And I'm hiring men to hold it for her—men the law can't touch."

He paused and sucked savagely on his cigarette, then flung it aside. "Nobody but a bunch of ignorant sod-bustin' nesters had the guts to take the little girl in and keep her when the Carmichaels got run out. She's growded up in a dugout in the side of a hill. She's had no schooling, no clothes, not half enough to eat. And not a damn' rancher in the forks of the River ever raised a helping hand!

"Let 'em git tromped in the shuffle—to hell with 'em! I can't never git back what's mine and hold it, but, by God, I can git it for the kid! She thinks I'm wild. She's right, I reckon. But I'll git back what belongs to her, and maybe one of these days she'll see it different."

Dale Langtry could see that bitterness and the cold unswerving purpose of the man had made him almost a fanatic. At the same time, he felt warm admiration stirring inside him. Vengeance, Thad Carmichael aimed to have. But a thirst for vengeance wasn't all that was inside him.

On sudden impulse, Dale Langtry said: "You wouldn't have to say much to get me to throw in on your side, Thad."

Behind him, he heard Hopper Taylor gasp. Thad Carmichael shook his head. "No," he said shortly. "You keep your heels clean. You aim to live here. I'll handle it my own way. I got men hired for the job. But I'm a-thanking you, Dale. And at the same time, I'm a-warnin' you, too."

Dale Langtry stiffened and shot a startled glance at the outlaw. He felt Thad Carmichael's pale cold eyes probing him.

"It's about Nina," said Thad Carmichael. "She told me what you done to Ben Corder and howcome. That's some more thanks I'm owin' you. But recollect just one thing, Dale. That kid's my sister. You treat her right or, by God, you'll have my guns to face!"

That rocked Dale Langtry to his bootheels. He gasped like a man struck a heavy blow. The blood drained from his face, leaving it pale beneath the dust of the corral. Then livid anger shot through

him and he burst out in a hoarse voice.

"Hell's fire, Carmichael!" he said in exasperation. "That girl's already cost me two fights, and I hardly know her!"

Thad Carmichael was swinging the big roan stud back toward the river. He looked back over his shoulder and grinned faintly at Dale Langtry.

"She might be worth the trouble of gittin' acquainted with," he said, then added. "But you recollect my warning!"

Dale Langtry stood numb and speechless and watched the big roan and its rider fade into the shadows along the river. There was the sound of splashing water and the popping of iron-shod hoofs on boulders, then the outlaw was gone.

Hopper Taylor said gravely: "We ain't got all the worms out of this calf yit."

★

NEXT morning Dale Langtry told his new hand that they'd saddle up and start combing the cedars.

"I want to drift the cattle back next to the river where we can keep a watch on them," he said. "I can't afford to lose any of my stuff in a cattle war."

"Thad Carmichael ain't going to bother you," Hopper Taylor said with conviction.

"Thad don't aim to," agreed the young rancher, "but like old Irv Russell says—them outlaw wolves in his pack won't be stopping to read brands by moonlight. We'll bring the cattle in where they'll be out of his way. The goats and hogs'll be safe enough, I reckon."

It was rough work up there in the cedar-covered ridges and gutted canyons. Rough on horses and men. When they knocked off work at noon and rode in for a bait of grub, Hopper Taylor wiped the sweat off his face and grinned.

"You've done convinced me of one thing," he observed. "I sure ain't on charity."

They were sadling fresh horses after dinner when Martha Russell came riding up the river. Dale Langtry felt his heart leap at the sight of her and swore under his breath.

Hopper Taylor tactfully reached for the reins of Dale Langtry's horse. "I'll give 'em water before we leave out," he said.

The girl rode straight toward Dale Langtry. He got busy building himself a cigarette. He lifted his hat as she pulled up. She looked as cool and beautiful and unattainable as ever.

"Howdy, Martha?" he greeted.

"Dale," she said, ignoring his greeting, "Dad wants you in the association. He's too proud to come ask you again. But I know what he wants, so I came."

Dale Langtry looked at the girl—at her cool green eyes, her pale gold hair, her perfectly molded face. He looked off down to the river where Hopper Taylor stood and held horses that had been watered only ten minutes before.

"Much obliged for coming, Martha," he said with an effort. "But I reckon I'm too savage. I can't help but feel like the Mill Iron has got coming anything Thad Carmichael wants to hand 'em."

He wasn't looking at her and she studied the bitter cragginess of his set jaw, her eyes inscrutable.

"You were a brute yesterday," she said evenly. "I didn't know then what Ben Corder had said to you. But that was still no excuse for beating him half to death."

Dale Langtry's laughter was without mirth, and he looked directly at the girl. "There was a time," he said with an edge to his voice, "when you'd have seen it different. I reckon you've changed, Martha."

"I have changed," she declared. "I've learned that violence and brutality settle nothing that a few well-polished good manners won't take care of. Then you won't join us?"

"No," said Dale Langtry, and felt as if he had shut a gate between them. He turned at the sound of a hard running horse coming up the river road.

Hopper Taylor heard it too. He swung into the saddle and led Dale Langtry's mount up out of the river.

Ted Adams, a Figure 8 rider, swept up on a lathered horse. Quick relief showed in his eyes at the sight of Martha Russell.

"Something wrong, Ted?" inquired the girl.

"Plenty," Ted Adams said. "Your dad sent me to bring you back. They got old Wiley Rex this morning about daylight."

"Wiley Rex!" exclaimed Dale Langtry in sudden alarm.

"Yeah," said the Figure 8 man. "Bush-

whacked him, right at the house. Crip Sols brought us word. Irv said to come hunt Miss Martha down and bring her home. He figures Thad Carmichael or some of his bunch got Wiley, and he don't want Miss Martha ridin' out alone no more."

Dale Langtry stood very still and the bleakness of his eyes deepened. Martha Russell whirled on him accusingly. "Now you know it isn't just the Mill Iron that Thad Carmichael's after," she flared. "It's anybody! *Everybody!*"

"Thad Carmichael," said Dale Langtry flatly, "didn't kill Wiley Rex."

"Didn't kill him!" the girl cried shrilly. "Then who did if he didn't? And how do you know he didn't?"

"Because," said Dale Langtry, "I talked to Thad Carmichael last night."

"So Ben Corder was right, then!" said the girl.

Dale Langtry shot a quick glance at her. "Could be," he said in level tones. "You seem to set a heap of store by him. Just what does Ben Corder say?"

"He says that if you're not with us against Thad Carmichael, then you're against us."

Dale Langtry stared at her for a moment as if he'd never seen her before. Then he turned to Hopper Taylor and reached for the bridle reins of his mount.

"We'll ride over to Wiley's outfit, Hopper," he said.

★

WILEY REX'S Wagon Wheel headquarters was situated on the North Llano at the mouth of Bear Creek. The wagon road between Junction and Sonora passed in front of it. South, across the river, high bold limestone cliffs jutted out toward the stream.

The two riders pounded up to the slab-rock house. Sunlight glinted on a rifle barrel at one of the windows and the riders hauled their horses back on their hunkers. An old black hound came out to bay them in a high thin voice.

"Charlie!" called Dale Langtry. "It's Dale and Hopper, Charlie!"

"Come on in, Dale," said the bald headed Wagon Wheel rider. "Wasn't taking no chances till I knowed who it was."

"Where's Wiley?" Dale Langtry wanted to know. "We come to look around a little."

The man came out of the house on saddle-warped legs. He motioned toward the corrals on the bank of the creek. "Right yonder is where he got it," he said. "He fell in the water and we roped him out so that catfish couldn't git him. But we was careful not to mess up the sign till others could take a look."

Old Wiley Rex lay on the bank of the creek, flat of his back, with a red bandana spread over his face. Dale Langtry lifted the hankerchief. The old man's face seemed relaxed, the caginess gone from his features now, leaving only that slight humorous uplift at the corners of his mouth. The slug had caught him high in the back and torn its way down through his heart. Wiley Rex had never realized what struck him.

"Me'n Crip," said Charlie Leslie, "was right there in the corals saddling our day horses when they got him. Couldn't tell nothing about the direction of the shot the way the sound rolled and echoed in the canyons. Heard the bullet hit him and then the splash when he tumbled into the water."

"Feeding his catfish, wasn't he?" asked Dale Langtry.

"Yeah," said Charlie Leslie. "Like he always done the first thing of a morning. Come down here with what biscuits we left from breakfast. Wiley got a heap of pleasure watching them big old catfish roll and knock the water, grabbing at them biscuit crumbs. Never would let anybody set a trotline in that creek hole. Claimed them fish was his pets."

There were tears in Charlie Leslie's sun-squinted eyes and he didn't bother to wipe them away. Few cowhands had the luck to draw a boss like Wiley Rex.

Hopper Taylor found old Wiley Rex's bootprints in the sandbar above the water. He stepped into them, then turned and looked directly behind him and up.

"Whoever got Wiley," he declared, "was up on that rim yonder across the river. I'm a-goin' up for a look-see."

"Yeah," said Dale Langtry. "We'll both go. Charlie, will Wiley's old cathound yonder work for me?"

"That old hound," said Charlie Leslie,

"will work for anybody what wants to trail something. What're you aiming to do?"

"We're aiming," said Dale Langtry, "to trail up Wiley's killer and get him."

Charlie Leslie's bald head wrinkled in alarm. "Hell, you ain't going to ride right into Seven Hundred Springs. Thad Carmichael'll bushwhack you both."

"I doubt it," said Dale Langtry grimly. "Let's pack old Wiley up to the house and get him out of the sun."

It took better than an hour's search to locate the spot where the bushwhacker had waited. They found no tracks then, only a couple of cigarette stubs on a bare hard shelf of rock. A clump of scrub wild persimmon grew up from the foot of the bench. A man squatted there was screened from the ranch house a quarter of a mile below. But standing erect on the ledge, Dale Langtry had a clear view of the sand bar on the bank above Wiley Rex's catfish hole.

"The dirty, sneaking snake that killed Wiley Rex," declared Hopper Taylor, "was somebody who knowed Wiley's way of doing. Knowed he come down yonder to feed them catfish every morning of the world."

"That's the way I'm figuring it," said Dale Langtry bleakly. "And I'd like to bet Thad Carmichael don't recollect that. If he ever knowed."

"Then who'n the hell you reckon done it?"

"That's what we aim to find out," said Dale Langtry. "He likely tied his horse in them Spanish oaks up yonder. Let's locate the spot and turn that hound loose."

They found where a horse had been tied for better than an hour, by the sign. They also found a fresh brass cartridge shell in trash nearby.

"The tricky son!" exclaimed Hopper Taylor. "Too foxy to jack out his shell where he done the killing!" He swung down and picked up the empty. "A Henry rifle!" he said. "Now who in this country packs a Henry?"

"Plenty of people," said Dale Langtry. "I'd rather depend on the hound."

Hopper Taylor released the black hound from his catch-rope and called his attention to a pile of horse manure. The dog sniffed tentatively, then looked up questioningly to make certain it was a horse he was wanted to trail.

"That's it, boy," urged Hopper. "Go git 'im."

The hound sniffed again, snorted and began a slow circle of the spot. Presently he wrung his stub tail and lined out, lifting his voice in a wailing trail cry.

Before he'd gone a hundred yards, however, he checked suddenly and came back to where he'd started.

"Smarter'n a whip," praised Hopper Taylor. "Knowed right off when he'd taken the wrong end of the trail."

A moment later, the hound lined out again. This time he didn't come back.

"That's it!" declared Hopper Taylor. "Let's ride!"

The trail led straight south for better than a couple of miles, holding closely to the rock-littered slopes and hard ground where the horse left few tracks. Then it swung abruptly to the east and the slow-trailing cat-hound moved faster and almost in a straight line.

Hopper Taylor dragged his new Winchester out of the scabbard and jacked open the breech to make sure he had a cartridge in the firing chamber. Up ahead, the hound's thin voice floated back across the ridges.

"We got us a coyote on the run," the peeler said savagely, "and if he values his scalp, he sure better make a long drift!"

The trail continued east for an hour's ride, then swung a little left and dropped down over the last rise, headed for town.

Hopper Taylor shot a look at his new boss. "You called the turn, all right," he said. "Thad Carmichael's too much wolf to be riding into town in broad daylight."

CHAPTER FOUR

Visitors for the Figure 8

THE trailing hound slowed at the edge of town. Other horses' tracks merged there with those he was following, thinning the scent. But he never faltered. He trotted along the dusty street, muzzle close to the ground, his pads knocking up little puff-balls of dust that swirled and eddied in the dry still air. He stopped to sniff the heels of a big dun horse tied in front of the town bank, calm-

ly dodged a flailing hoof the animal slammed at him, then trotted on to the next.

In front of Tom Ball's saloon he picked out a stocking-legged sorrel tied to the hitch-rail. He circled the animal twice, to make sure, then sat back on his hunkers. He lifted his nose and bayed loudly. He kept on baying.

Dale Langtry and Hopper Taylor were right on the hound's heels. Dale Langtry took one look at the Mill Iron brand on the sorrel's left hip, then reached for the rifle sticking out of the scabbard.

A group of curious onlookers had come out into the street and were moving toward them. Sod Mercer called: "What's up, Dale?"

Dale Langtry didn't answer.

"It's a Henry, all right," said Hopper Taylor.

Dale Langtry nodded. He stuck the rifle back in its scabbard and swung down. He left his own rifle on his saddle and shifted his six-shooter in place. His eyes were ice-cold as he turned toward the saloon.

"We got him treed, Hopper," he said.

Hopper Taylor nodded and came down out of the saddle, moving as cautiously as a cat. He held his Winchester in his right hand and the hammer was drawn back to full cock.

"I'll take him, Dale!" he said hoarsely.

"No," said Dale Langtry sharply. "This is six-shooter work, Hopper. Just keep your eyes open and don't let nobody get at my back!"

The onlookers had caught on and were spreading to points of safety. The street was gripped suddenly in a hushed silence. Then the batwing doors of the saloon spread open and Gringo Lorenzo stepped out on the sidewalk.

Quick concern showed in his swarthy face at the sight of Rex's hound baying his horse. He shot a wary look at Dale Langtry and Hopper Taylor standing close by. His yellow-brown eyes suddenly glittered like slits of sun-lit glass.

"You ride in on this sorrel, Gringo?" demanded Dale Langtry.

The breed's yellow eyes shot a quick look at the silent crowd, then moved slowly back to Dale Langtry. "Maybe," he said. "What of it?"

"We just trailed that horse from the rimrock across the river from the Wagon Wheel," said Dale Langtry. "Who give you orders to hide out and back-shoot old Wiley Rex?"

The eyes of Gringo Lorenzo flamed suddenly and he moved with the speed of a pouncing catamount, leaping sideways off the sidewalk and drawing at the same time.

Dale Langtry was ready and the urge to kill was hot within him. But the breed's first slug cut across his thigh like a hot branding iron. Dale Langtry's first shot beat the breed's by a hair—but was a miss. Lorenzo's second shot slapped through the slack in Dale Langtry's brush-jumper under his left arm. Then the rancher pulled his .45 down out of the bounce and triggered again.

The solid impact of the butt in his hand was a satisfying thing. The breed straightened suddenly out of his crouch, teetered a moment on his boothheels. Then with a strangled cry, he pitched forward on his face.

When Dale Langtry was certain the man would never move again, he stuck his six-shooter in its scabbard and turned toward his horse.

The shattering reports of the gun had hushed the baying hound and in the stifling silence that followed, he padded forward and sniffed at the blood pouring from the breed's chest. Then he lifted his muzzle and wailed.

Somewhere a man said "My God!" and up the sidewalk came two Mill Iron riders on the run. They had their six-shooters drawn and the pound and clank of their spurred boots was loud against the loose-board sidewalks.

Hopper Taylor swung the muzzle of his Winchester toward them, holding it belly-high, and said sharply: "I'd hold it there, you fellers!"

The Mill Iron riders checked suddenly and one called out hoarsely: "What the hell you mean, Langtry, riding in here and gunning down Gringo Lorenzo?"

"What'n the hell did Gringo mean," retorted Dale Langtry, "bushwhacking old Wiley Rex? That's what I want to know."

"Wiley Rex!"

"Maybe you hadn't heard about it!"

said Hopper Taylor scornfully. "The white-livered coyote!"

The Mill Iron man shook his head. "I'd heard Wiley was shot," he admitted, "but—but, hell! Why would Gringo want to shoot him?"

"I'm betting he didn't," said Dale Langtry. "Not on his own hook, anyhow. What I want to know is who sent him up yonder to do the killing."

The Mill Iron riders glanced at each other indecisively. The speaker said: "I hope you know what you're doing, Dale!"

"I'm watching close," said Dale Langtry. He turned to the little peeler. "I reckon we're ready to go," he said.

They turned and swung up. Tom Ball's sad voice cut through the silence.

"The drinks are on the house," he announced. "For the first time in the history of Junction, there's been a killing here, and my floors ain't bloody!"

Hopper Taylor's eyes lighted with anticipation and he started to swing down and join the men moving quietly toward the saloon.

"I said, let's go, Hopper," Dale Langtry said.

"Go!" said the little peeler in alarm. "Hell, that's the first time on record Tom Ball ever offered to serve drinks on the house."

"Irv Russell," said Dale Langtry, "will be calling in association members to ride out to Seven Hundred Springs. That'll be a slaughter. We got to stop it."

"Well, all right," complained Hopper Taylor. "But I could a-saved you a heap of wages at that bar."

A CROWD of riders was at the Figure 8 when Dale Langtry and Hooper Taylor came in on lathered horses. Some were saddling up, others roping fresh horses out of the corrals. Every man wore his six-shooter and there were saddle guns sticking out of the rigs. A tense harshness was evident in the men's faces.

Irv Russell came out, nodding grimly. "Glad you came to your senses, Dale," he said grimly. "But it's hell to think that old Wiley Rex had to git it in the back before you could understand."

On the gallery behind Russell stood Mark Nunn and Ben Corder. Dale Langtry was watching them when he said flatly: "Thad Carmichael didn't shoot Wiley Rex. It was Gringo Lorenzo."

Irv Russell stiffened as if he'd been struck a blow. "Gringo Lorenzo!" he exclaimed.

Mark Nunn whirled and came down off the gallery with quick strides. "What kind of damn' fool talk is this?" he demanded harshly. "What'd the breed want to shoot Wiley for?"

"That's what I'm wanting to know, Nunn," said Dale Langtry.

Scattered riders heard the excited voices. They halted what they were doing and moved toward the house, stony-eyed and cautious. Hopper Taylor still sat on his panting horse. Quietly, with slow, unhurried movements, he drew his Winchester from its boot and laid it across his saddle bow.

Irv Russell's grizzled under jaw was working in excitement. "That's strong talk, Dale," he said. "What you got to back it up?"

Dale Langtry told him, still keeping an eye on Mark Nunn. The old man gasped.

"And you done killed him?"

"I killed him," said Dale Langtry.

"Killed him on the word of a damn' hound-dog!" flared Mark Nunn. "My God, I ought to shoot you between the eyes, Dale Langtry."

"You," said Hopper Taylor calmly, "ain't got the guts to try it, Mark Nunn. And if that slick-haired partner of yours makes ary another move toward that six-shooter of his'n, I aim to blow a hole in his belly that black hound could run through." He spat in the dust and licked sun-cracked lips.

Irv Russell whirled on Ben Corder. "Damn you, Corder!" he roared. "What the hell's the matter with you? Afraid of something?"

"What I'm afraid of," said Ben Corder, "is that you'll let this loud-mouthed killer talk you out of doing what we got to get done. And that's go get Thad Carmichael."

Old Irv Russell stared at the younger man a moment. "If Gringo Lorenzo kilt Wiley Rex, just why'n the hell should we go after Thad Carmichael right now? Dale Langtry ain't got no call to lie about a thing like this. When I'm sure Car-

michael's the man we're after, we'll go after him. But till I am, I ain't leading a bunch of good men into a fight where the chances are they won't come out alive."

"Then you're letting a long-winded yarn bust our association down before it gets started, Irv," said Mark Nunn. "Anybody can come riding in with a pack of lies—"

"I'd be careful, Nunn," Dale Langtry warned gently. "I'd sure be careful."

Ben Corder swore savagely. "Let's go, Mark," he said. "This damn' outfit ain't got the sense the Almighty promised a horned frog."

Mark Nunn stood white-faced before Dale Langtry, staring at him with hate-filled eyes. "I just want to tell you this, Langtry," he said. "You over-played your hand when you killed Gringo Lorenzo. And you'll damn' well remember it, too. Call the boys, Ben."

The Mill Iron bunch rode off and gradually the rest of the ranchers and their hands began to drift out of sight. Dale Langtry told Irv Russell he had a little more he wanted to tell him and the old man led him to the gallery, where they got chairs.

Hopper Taylor found himself a whiskey jug beside the door. He picked it up without invitation and made himself comfortable on the doorsteps.

"It had to be Ben Corder and Mark Nunn, Irv," Dale Langtry said flatly. "Thad Carmichael wouldn't have knowed that old Wiley Rex fed his catfish every morning in the same place at the same time. But Ben and Mark knowed it. And the way I see it, they ribbed Gringo up for the bushwhacking job. With a killing they could lay to Thad Carmichael, they knowed they could bring every rancher between the Llanos to their side, eager to run Carmichael out. They knowed there wasn't a better-liked man in the country than Wiley Rex, and they knowed what would happen when he was killed."

Irv Russell shook his head, a frown deepening the creases in his leathery face.

"It sure looks like you've called the turn, Dale," he said. "Bad as I hate to think there's a man in the country that'd do a thing like that. What's our next move?"

"Sit tight," said Dale Langtry. "Let Thad Carmichael alone. Give the Mill Iron bunch a chance to make another mistake."

Martha Russell stepped out on the gallery. Hopper Taylor guiltily shifted the whiskey out of her sight, and Dale Langtry got to his feet.

"What happened?" she inquired. "I thought you were going after Thad Carmichael."

"It wasn't Thad Carmichael," said Irv Russell. "It was Gringo Lorenzo. Dale, here, got him."

The girl's horror-struck eyes flashed to Dale Langtry. "You mean," she said incredulously, "that you *killed* him?"

Something in her tone of voice irritated Dale Langtry. "Yes," he said with a grimace. "That was the brute savage in me working to the top again."

His eyes were inscrutable as he stared at her. The girl bit her lips and went back into the house. Dale Langtry shook hands with the rancher and strode out to his horse, Hopper Taylor following behind him.

They were half-way home before Dale Langtry discovered that his new hand had stolen Irv Russell's jug of whiskey.

"Don't let Irv jack up the price on you," cautioned Hopper Taylor. "This damn rot-gut likker ain't fit for a reservation Injun."

He lifted the jug again to make sure.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Nice Neck for a Noose

A THUNDER storm hit just at daylight the next morning. A bolt of lightning struck a post oak down by the corrals, splintering the wood to cook-stove lengths. The same ripping report seemed to loosen the flood gates. The rain poured down.

Dale Langtry had been sleeping on a homemade bunk he'd rigged up out on the shed gallery of his cabin, where the breeze off the river was cool. He awoke with a start. He sat up to watch the wild play of lightning and listen to the thunder roll and boom in the canyons.

Hopper Taylor came out in his drawers. He picked up his jug and drew on his wage account again.

"Damned if she don't look like a chunk-floater," he remarked.

He'd turned to go back to bed when the sound of galloping hoofs approaching halted him. He reached for the Winchester standing against the door jam and levered a shell into the barrel. Dale Langtry felt for his six-shooter belt hanging at the head of his bunk.

The sound of the galloping hoofs rounded the corrals and a horse and rider appeared out of the gloom. It wasn't till the rider came down off the horse that they saw it was a girl, and that she'd been riding bareback.

The girl ran through the rain toward the house, hesitated at the steps, then came on up, evidently unaware of the two men watching her.

"Mr. Langtry!" she called timidly.

"Nina Carmichael!" yelped Hopper Taylor. He dropped his gun against the door jam and came padding out on the gallery, then suddenly remembered. "My God!" he yelped. "I'm in my drawers!" He whirled and scampered back into the darkened room, his bare feet drumming the puncheon floor.

The girl had gasped and halted at the sight of him and now stood just in out of the rain. She wore cracked boots, faded jeans, and a patched shirt whose sleeves had been torn off at the elbows. She was drenched to the skin. The black hair of her bare head hung limply around an oval face and down over rounded breasts. Her black eyes were startled.

Dale Langtry took all this in at a glance, too surprised to move. Her eyes shifted to where he sat on his cot stripped to the waist. She gasped again and he saw a warm flush spread over her face. Dale Langtry felt the blood rising from his own neck.

Hopper Taylor saved the situation. "My God, Dale!" he shouted. "Don't just set there with your fool mouth hanging open. Tell the little thing to go on into the kitchen till we're decent."

Dale Langtry laughed suddenly. "Go on in, Miss Nina," he invited. "We'll be up in a minute."

The girl went inside and Dale Langtry liked the struggle between good humor and embarrassment he saw in her face as she turned.

Good humor had won out by the time he'd pulled on his clothes and entered the kitchen. She already had the oil lamp lighted and she met his sheepish grin with a frank, good-natured smile. Then her face sobered and she spoke quickly.

"I had to come!" she said. "They're threatening to burn you out. Uncle Ples Jacob was in town last night. His mule got loose and grazed around to the back of the saloon and while he was trying to hem it up in the alley, he heard them.

"Who?" asked Dale Langtry.

"Ben Corder and Mark Nunn. I tried to get Uncle Ples to come warn you earlier, but Uncle Ples doesn't like ranch people. He's always hated them since mother married daddy. So I sneaked out a horse and came."

She stood in the middle of the kitchen in a puddle the rain-water from her drenched clothes made on the floor. Her teeth chattered as she talked—partly from chill and partly from nervousness, Dale Langtry suspected.

He said, "Hopper, dig out some dry duds for Miss Carmichael. Yours ought to be just about a fit. I'll start a breakfast fire." He smiled his gratitude at the girl. "You'll do to take along, Miss Nina. I don't hardly know how to thank you."

Her dark eyes lighted with sudden warmth. "You did me a favor once," she said. "I didn't want you to think I didn't remember." She frowned. "They plan to raid you and burn you out, and make it look like Thad had done it."

"Now ain't that just like them treacherous, underhanded dogs!" said Hopper Taylor from the doorway. "Well, let 'em cut loose their wolves. I got a comin' itch to line the sights of that brand-spanking new Winchester on something that's needing a good killing!" He came on into the kitchen, a bundle of clean clothes in his hand.

The girl shivered at his fierceness. "I wish Thad hadn't come back," she said. "I wish he'd just forget what happened to the Carmichaels and go away."

"Thad's aiming for you to have the Mill Iron," said Dale Langtry.

"I know," she said. "I'd like to get it back if Thad could stay on and run it. But he can't. And I don't want it if it's going to cost the lives of innocent people

to get it back. I tried to tell Thad that, but he gets a look in his eyes sometimes that stops me. It's awful, that look. I can't tell him a thing. . . ."

"Nobody," said Dale Langtry gently, "is telling your brother anything now, Miss Nina. You forget about it. Go put on those dry clothes while I get breakfast."

The bronc-twister was small, but his town clothes were over-sized for the slender figure of the girl. She felt ludicrous as she came hesitantly back into the kitchen. She flushed at the broad grins of the two men.

"You look fine!" encouraged Dale Langtry.

"Cute as a spotted bug," put in Hopper Taylor. "Bet them duds'll tie themselves into hard knots the next time I threaten to crawl inside 'em."

He cackled at the flustered girl and led her to the kitchen table, patting her on the shoulder.

"You set right here, miss," he said, dragging out a chair. "Bring on that coffee, Dale."

They talked it over while they ate. Nina Carmichael said her Uncle Ples hadn't learned when the raid on Dale Langtry's outfit was to take place. Dale Langtry said he didn't look to have to wait long for it.

"Mark Nunn and Ben Corder," he said, "are being crowded out into the open. When we busted that cap in their faces about Gringo Lorenzo yesterday, they lost plenty of support. Maybe the association hasn't quit altogether, but I'd bet the Mill Iron bunch will do some tall talking before they get anybody to side them in a fight. They're in a tight and they're getting desperate."

"And we'd better take to laying out with the dry cows of a night," said Hopper Taylor. "I ain' got whiskey enough on hand to keep from frying if we got trapped in this shack."

★

NINA CARMICHAEL helped Dale Langtry with the dishes while Hopper Taylor went out to wrangle the horse trap.

Dale Langtry could see that the girl was dead on her feet. She'd lost a night's sleep. She'd made a long ride in the rain. And now that she'd had breakfast, she couldn't keep her eyelids from drooping. He went out and straightened the blankets on his bunk and told her to lie down and rest awhile before she went back.

"Hopper'll see that your horse gets a feed," he said.

The girl was asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. The rain had stopped and the sun was topping the ridges. Dale Langtry sat down on the foot-end of the bunk to roll a smoke and try to figure out how best to meet the raid of the Mill Iron outfit.

Hopper Taylor would stand hitched, he knew, fighting as fiercely as an old wolf in a stand-off fight. But two men against the Mill Iron! That would be rough go-

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ing. He wasn't fooling himself on that point.

But he arrived at no solution. The presence of the sleeping Nina Carmichael was too disturbing. He studied the unconscious girl's face as a man looking upon a woman for the first time. Her breathing was regular and even. Her hair was drying now, gathering about her face in soft dark waves.

He realized suddenly that she was beautiful, and caught himself comparing her to Martha Russell. There was really no comparison. Martha Russell was beautiful in a finely-carved, well-groomed, cultured sort of way; but this girl had a beauty of spirit. She was beautiful even in Hopper Taylor's loud town clothes that fit her nowhere. There was a warmth and humor and genuineness about her that tugged at a man and made him feel good inside.

He grinned wryly at the remembrance of Hopper Taylor's remark that Nina Carmichael wouldn't need four years of back-East schooling to make her shine like a new dollar in a mud-hole—that all she needed was a fresh-starched gingham dress.

He reckoned Hopper's shrewd old eyes had seen something that he'd been blind to. Then he found himself remembering Thad Carmichael's warning. "You treat the kid right or by God, you'll have my guns to face!"

He swore under his breath. Hell! Did everybody know more about him than he knew about himself. He suddenly felt like a fool.

He felt more like one when old Irv and Martha Russell rounded the house and found him sitting on the foot of the bunk, gazing enraptured at the sleeping girl. He'd been too engrossed in his own thoughts to hear their approach.

He came to his feet and knew that the red was crawling up his neck. "Good morning," he said. "Get down and we'll breakfast."

Both the riders had been drenched by the sudden thunderstorm, but were drying out in the morning sun.

"We've et," said Irv Russell shortly. "We come to warn you. Mark Nunn and Ben Corder is making threats that they aim to git your scalp."

Dale Langtry could see Martha Russell's eyes on the sleeping girl. Those eyes held open scorn, even hate.

"Much obliged," he said. "Nina Carmichael, here, rode in with about the same warning just at daylight."

Martha Russell smiled contemptuously. The scorn was still in her eyes.

Sudden anger gripped Dale Langtry. What did Martha Russell know about loyalty and courage? She'd had everything handed to her on a silver platter. She'd had enough schooling for three women. Yet she had no faith in mankind. She saw a nester girl sleeping on a man's bunk. Her hide-bound conventions made no allowance for such conduct. So she condemned the man and the girl without a hearing.

"Let's go talk it over with Hopper," he said to Irv Russell. "Martha, you can go in and maybe dry out a little by the cookstove."

The two men headed for the corral.

★

NINA CARMICHAEL woke up as Martha Russell entered the kitchen. She got up sleepily and followed. "Good morning," she said. "I'll get you some coffee."

"Never mind," said Martha Russell. "Possibly I don't know Dale's kitchen as well as you, but I think I can find the coffee."

Nina Carmichael halted in the doorway as though she'd been slapped. Her smile of greeting crumpled and her dark eyes made great pools in her face as she went pale.

She looked Martha Russell in the face. "You hate me, don't you?" she asked slowly. Her voice was hurt and puzzled.

Martha Russell lifted a well-shaped eyebrow. "Why should I hate you?" she asked. "I hardly know you!" Her tone was patronizing, but her voice rose uncontrollably.

"It's in your eyes," Nina Carmichael answered. "It was there the day you came home from school. You were talking to Ben Corder. When I passed, he said something to you. You looked up and you were hating me then. Why?"

"I'm afraid you flatter yourself, my

dear," Martha Russell had her voice under control now. "Why should I be concerned, one way or another, with a nester girl?" She added bitingly: "I leave that to Dale Langtry."

Nina Carmichael stared at Irv Russell's daughter a long time. Then she said quietly, without personal rancor, "You're a fool, Martha Russell. Dale Langtry is a man you can trust. But he isn't a man to be jumped through loops the way you'd treat a pet dog. He's a man a woman could stick with through thick or thin!"

She went inside and changed back into her half-dry clothes. A moment later she'd mounted the bare back of her uncle's plow horse and was heading him toward the Johnson Fork of the Llano.

* * *

DOWN at the corrals, old Irv Russell was saying: "Henry Wilder told me about it, Dale. Him and some of the boys was in Junction last night. Mark Nunn and Ben Corder and some of their crew were in town. They was fighting their booze and talking careless. Looks like Mark and Ben have gone plumb crazy. Me'n Henry talked it over. We about decided we better band together against the Mill Iron, instead of Thad Carmichael.

Dale Langtry was squatted on his heels in the middle of the corral. He jabbed the blade of his pocket knife into a dried cow chip and shook his head.

"No," he said. "You men stay out of it. You'll just be bringing trouble on yourselves. Me'n Hopper'll handle this end. Now that we know what's coming. We'll take our bedrolls to the brush of a night and keep a good watch!"

"They may clean us out," said Hopper Taylor. "But I'd hate to be in their boots when me'n Dale open up on 'em with them new Winchesters."

"All right," said Irv Russell. "If you figure it's best, we'll set tight right now. But if that wasn't just whiskey-talk Ben Corder and Mark Nunn was shoveling out last night, the Mill Iron is liable to be short-handed when Thad Carmichael and his bunch come blood-hunting.

"We stood back and let the Carmichaels git run out of the country. They was a wild bunch and we didn't much care. But if Mark and Ben make a move against ary outfit in the forks of the River here now, they'll find they've stirred them up a wasp nest, and a big 'un!"

★

THEY got Dale Langtry that afternoon. He and Hopper Taylor had been combing the brush for any stray cattle they might have missed the first day, and they'd gotten separated.

Dale Langtry was chousing a little band of brush-wild yearlings out of a gorge back from the river a piece when four armed men rode out between him and his cattle.

They were Mark Nunn, Ben Corder, Cherry Wilson and Stoop Henley. They had their guns out and they were watching him like cats:

"You can lift 'em, Langtry," ordered Ben Corder, "or make a try for that fast gun of your'n. It don't make a damn to us. But git your mind made up in a hurry."

Dale Langtry lifted his hands to the level of his hatbrim. There was no alternative. He might get one or two of them, but he couldn't get them all.

"What kind of a handspring you fixing to turn now, Nunn?" he asked. "This could backfire."

"We got it all figured out," said Mark Nunn. "And it won't backfire. When I told you you couldn't gun down Gringo Lorenzo without paying for it, I wasn't just rattling my teeth. Git down out of that saddle before I shoot you out!"

"Lemme git his gun, Mark," said Ben Corder.

He touched spurs to his mount and moved up beside Dale Langtry, careful not to get between him and the others. Warily, he reached out and dragged Dale Langtry's Winchester from its scabbard. He dropped it to the ground, then reached for the rancher's six-shooter.

He got his hands on it and exhaled a little sigh of relief. A malicious grin parted his thin lips as he jerked it from Langtry's belt. He started to stick it in his own belt, then lifted it suddenly and with a vicious snarl chopped at Dale Langtry's head.

Dale Langtry's lights went out. He toppled out of the saddle like a sack of salt. Ben Corder piled off his horse and leaped on the sprawled body, stomping it, kicking brutally at the face.

"By God, I'll show you how it feels!" he cried hoarsely.

With an oath, Cherry Wilson spurred up and caught Ben Corder by the shirt collar, yanking him loose. "That don't do, Ben!" he said.

Ben Corder jerked loose and whirled on the Mill Iron hand. "Keep your hands off me," he raged. "I'll do as I damn' please. Remember who's payin' your wages!"

"I'm recollecting," said Cherry Wilson, reaching for a six-shooter. "But a little more of that and I'll quit the job and shoot the boss I been working for. You can beat up on Dale Langtry all you want to while he's on his feet. I'll help you hang him, like I agreed. But you'll play hell stomping his teeth and guts out while he's down! Anybody else feel different about it?" He glared at Mark Nunn and the other Mill Iron rider.

"I ain't arguing with you on that score, Cherry," said Stoop Henley. "I'm backing you."

Mark Nunn said: "Don't be a blood-hog, Ben. Git down and hog-tie him, Cherry. Stoop, you git a hatful of water and throw in his face."

The hatful of water didn't bring Dale Langtry around, however, nor a second one. Ben Corder had come close to killing the young rancher with the barrel of that six-shooter.

They loaded him across his own saddle and took him to the Mill Iron headquarters, keeping to the brush and low places to hide their movements.

"Pitch him on a cot in the bunkhouse," Mark Nunn ordered his men. "If the damn' meddler don't kick the bucket, we'll hang him, when he comes around enough to enjoy the show!"

CHAPTER SIX

Hell at the Mill Iron

IT WAS dark when Dale Langtry came to. He was sick all over. His head was a thudding torture. One of his teeth had been kicked out and his mouth was full of clotted blood. His face was lumpy and stiff and there was a tearing pain in his side, as if a rib had been caved in.

He had to make a long uphill fight through dizzy mists to realize even that. He wasn't right sure yet what had happened to him. He tried to move. The pain gagged him. He hung his head over the edge of the cot and got sick. That hurt more, but it helped clear his head. That's when he realized he was bound, hand and foot. A moment later, he was conscious of gentle rain rattling on a low roof over his head.

He lay there a long time and gradually collected his senses. He could remember now that sudden up-sweep of his own six-shooter in Ben Corder's hand. He could figure out the rest. Ben Corder had knocked him out and then proceeded to work him over.

Beyond a door he heard the clump of boot heels and the clanking rattle of heavy-roweled spurs. Mark Nunn came into the room carrying a lighted lantern. Behind him was another Mill Iron rider, Lode Devers.

Mark Nunn set the lantern on a table, noticed that Dale Langtry was conscious again, and smiled a thin, flat-lipped smile.

"It looks like," he remarked to his rider, "that he'll do to hang now."

Dale Langtry lay there on the bed and stared at Mark Nunn. He said nothing.

Mark Nunn said: "I told you you'd pay for killing Gringo Lorenzo. That breed was a damned good man."

"Damned good shot with a Henry rifle," acknowledged Dale Langtry. "You couldn't have picked a better one. Gringo got old Wiley with one shot at close to five hundred yards. How much money did I save you when I gunned the breed down and let him collect in hell?"

Mark Nunn's eyes became hard as flint. "Drag him out, Lode. He rattles off at the head too much. We'll see what his tune is when he's decorating that old dead cottonwood down yonder by the creek."

Lode Devers began jerking the piggin' strings loose from Dale Langtry's feet and hands. "I git the rope-pulling job, Mark," he said. "Gringo Lorenzo was a sidekick of mine."

Ben Corder came in in time to help jerk

Dale Langtry to his feet. The rancher staggered dizzily and would have fallen if they hadn't caught him. Ben Corder slapped his face. "Don't try playing sick on us now," he said. "You'll live to hang, and we know it!"

They led him out of the room. Mark Nunn's lantern revealed a black blur of men out in the slow drizzle of rain. A murmur ran through them at the sight of Dale Langtry.

Mark Nunn halted just outside the door. "You boys know howcome we're hanging this jasper. On the strength of a fool hound baying Gringo's horse, Dale Langtry made out that the breed bushwhacked old Wiley Rex. He taken it on himself to gun the breed down, without giving him a chance to prove himself innocent. If you ask me, it was a cover-up. Dale Langtry's hand-in-glove with Thad Carmichael and his owlhoot bunch, and it's my bet Gringo Lorenzo happened onto a little inside dope about the partnership that Dale Langtry didn't want told. So he guns down the breed to shut him up. Somebody git a rope."

Dale Langtry felt a shiver of cold fear run through his body. This bunch meant business. His voice rang out harshly.

"You men'll pay for this, remember. Mark Nunn is a liar when he says Gringo Lorenzo didn't kill Wiley Rex. Irv Russell knows that now. So does Henry Wilder and the rest of the association. They'll run you out of the country for this if they don't kill you first."

"Dry up!" barked Ben Corder. "You can't beg off now! Bring another lantern, boys. Mark wants him hung to that old dead cottonwood."

"Yeah," grinned Mark Nunn. "He'll be handy for the buzzards there. That's where they like to roost when we kill a beef."

Mud sucked at Dale Langtry's boots. The soft rain was cold on his battered face. He drew in huge lungfuls of the fresh night air as if he couldn't get enough. Then he realized that fear was making him nervous and he cursed under his breath.

The dead cottonwood stood in the bed of a rocky creek. Twenty feet up, a ragged snag hung out over the bank. Ben Corder fitted the hangnoose over Dale Langtry's head and drew it up snug against his neck. Lode Devers had to make a third try in the dark to pitch the other end of the rope across the dead branch. When finally he made it, he caught the knot as it swung past and pulled the rope tight.

"We're ready, Mark," he said.

Mark Nunn held his lantern high, even with Dale Langtry's face. Beyond the flickering light, the young rancher could see Ben Corder's eyes, gleaming with triumph.

"This here," said Mark Nunn thinly, "is what happens to them that try to buck the Mill Iron. You better git to praying, Langtry, if you got any praying to do."

"If you're aiming to see me beg and crawl, Nunn," said Dale Langtry stonily, "you're wasting time. I don't wear the Mill Iron brand."

With the choking rage of a mad animal, Ben Corder lunged at him.

★

DALE LANGTRY kicked him in the belly. The younger owner of the Mill Iron sat back with a grunt, his eyes rolling in his head.

Dale Langtry tried to follow up, but Lode Devers yanked on the rope, jerking him back and off balance. The tightening loop cut off Dale Langtry's wild, hoarse laughter. He clawed at the rope, loosening it to get air.

Somebody caught his hands and held them. Ben Corder got back his wind and came in, screaming with rage, pounding wildly at Dale Langtry with his fists. Cherry Wilson loosed a haymaker that knocked Ben Corder flat on his back and wheeled, backing up to Dale Langtry and dragging his six-shooter. The rider's long jaw was set grimly and his voice was hoarse with fury.

"I'll shoot the belly off the next scissorbill that tries anything," he said. "There ain't nobody else touching this gent till the job's done. Now hang him, by God, or turn him loose. And make it a hurry-up case!"

Mark Nunn stepped forward, lifting his lantern again. "Easy, now, Cherry," he said in a mocking tone.

That's when the bullet got Mark Nunn. It got him square between the eyes.

When it struck him, there was a fleshy *thock,* as if he'd been spanked in the face with a board. Then to the left sounded the crashing report of a single Winchester.

The look on Mark Nunn's face turned to stupid, dying wonder. The lantern fell from his hands and he melted to the ground in the stunned silence that followed.

The silence was short. On the heels of that single gun report came a ripping, shattering fusillade of shots, followed by the thunder of hoofs and the wild yipping yells of hard-riding men.

Lode Devers grunted and bent double. He pitched on his face, the hang rope slipping through his fingers. Somewhere a man's voice lifted in a shrill, unearthly scream. Then suddenly to Dale Langtry all was a terrible confusion of surging, yelling men, thundering horse hoofs and the angry bark and snarl of flashing guns. Above it rose one wild, terrified yell.

"Carmichael! It's Thad Carmichael!"

In the dying light of a shattered lantern, Dale Langtry reached for the bole of the cottonwood to keep himself from falling. It was as if he were something apart from all this, as if he were alone and merely a spectator. He stood and stared groggily and made no effort to help himself or join the fight.

Then a big roan horse came to a rearing, rump-sliding halt beside him. A long, dark figure piled out of the saddle. He hit the ground, spurs jangling, and snatched the loop from Dale Langtry's neck.

"Git down under that creek bank!" said Thad Carmichael hoarsely. He gave Dale Langtry a shove that knocked him off balance.

The young rancher fell hard, got to his hands and knees and dragged himself over the bank. He landed in cold water. Thad Carmichael followed him, levering a shell into his rifle. He was laughing a cackling, maniacal laugh that made Dale Langtry's blood run cold.

"Close shave, wolf-hunter," he shouted, pounding Dale Langtry on the back. "See me git that damned Nunn square between the eyes? And him holding the light for me to see him by." He cackled again.

He came to his feet, fired once, then fired again. Then he leaped up on the low bank and shouted: "They're fixing to hole up in the house, boys! Set the damned thing afire. Burn 'em out and shoot 'em down like rats. Don't leave a one able to kick!"

Dale Langtry lay there in the water and watched the man.

Thad Carmichael had come back. He was paying off an old debt. He was standing up there on the creek bank, laughing and crying and shouting and shooting. This was the thing he'd gone through hell for and he was tasting the full savage joy of his vengeance.

Suddenly he grunted and bent over, then turned slowly, emitting a gurgling cry. He piled off the creek bank on top of Dale Langtry, rolled sideways and hit the water with a splash.

Dale Langtry was too weak yet to get up, but he managed to haul the outlaw's face out of the water so he wouldn't drown.

"You bad hit, Thad?" he asked.

"Bad. Plenty bad, Dale," he gasped. "They got me. I can tell. They got me, damn 'em, but they done it too late. I done got Mark Nunn and the boys'll wipe the rest of the nest clean. They got me, but they was too late—too late!" He started laughing.

Suddenly he hushed and gripped Dale Langtry's arm, his fingers biting into flesh like the steel jaws of a wolf trap.

"Dale," he said. "Listen—you got to listen. We was friends, wasn't we? Good friends. We wolf-hunted together. We stole watermelons together. We—"

"We were good friends, Thad," said Dale Langtry. "I'm listening."

"All right," said the outlaw. "Friends has got to stick together. You got to help me. You got to back the kid. You got to see that she gits the Mill Iron and keeps it. I aimed to hire men to run it for her. Now I can't. I'm done. I can't leave it with the wild bunch of wolves I brung in here. They're killers, Dale. Like Mark Nunn and old Ike Corder and his sneaking son, Ben. Listen at 'em howl. I can't leave them to run the outfit for the kid."

"No," said Dale Langtry. "You can't leave it to them."

Thad Carmichael's face was only a blur to Dale Langtry in the darkness, but he could hear the outlaw's breath whistling

in his throat. There was an ominous bubbling sound lower down in his chest.

"All right," said Thad Carmichael. "So you got to take it over. You got to run the ranch for her. Buy her purty clothes. Take her places. Make a lady out of her. A grand lady. Give her a schoolin' if she wants it. All the things me'n her was due to git, but got robbed of. You promise, Dale!" The outlaw's words were running together he was in such a hurry to get it all out.

Dale Langtry didn't hesitate. "I promise," he said.

The outlaw heaved a sigh of relief, then surged up on his elbows. "And you'll treat her right, Dale!" he whispered fiercely. "You'll treat her right, or by God, I'll come back from the grave and git you!"

There was a lump in Dale Langtry's throat that nearly choked him. "Don't you worry about that, Thad," he said hoarsely. "I'll treat her like a grand lady. If she'll gimme the chance."

Thad Carmichael lay back in the water. "I always knowed," he breathed, "that you was my friend, Dale. I can count on you."

His body stiffened suddenly and his grip on Dale Langtry's arm clamped down like a vice. Then it loosened and his hand fell limply away. It made a little splash as it hit the water.

WHEN he could get the strength, Dale Langtry staggered up out of the creek. In his hands were those black-butted, silver-chased six-shooters of Thad Carmichael's and in his mind was a determination to get Ben Corder if the younger Mill Iron owner was still alive. The savage fury of the wild night was in his blood as he headed for the ranch house at a stumbling run.

Up there, the guns were still roaring and bellowing. Crimson flashes speared the darkness. Men yelled in triumph or the fear of death.

In his weakness, Dale Langtry fell down twice. The second time he lay a long time before he could gather enough strength to get to his feet. A new kind of light, different from the flash of guns, suddenly began to grow, and with it came the crackling and popping of burning timbers.

"Burn 'em out!" Thad Carmichael had shouted to his men, and the wild band was getting the job done. They had set fire to the ranch house where the Mill Iron crew had holed up to make their stand-off.

Built of cedar poles, the dried and seasoned timbers caught easily in spite of the recent rain on them. Flames spread magically, sputtering and flaring as they ate into the resin. The ragged circle of light widened and spread.

Dale Langtry could hear the despairing yells of the trapped men inside the house. He could hear the triumphant howls of the furious renegades. The sound made him shiver. "They're wolves!" Thad Carmichael had said. "Listen at 'em howl!"

Dale Langtry listened and kept dragging himself toward the fight. It was hard because sometimes his head was whirling and then again it was the flaming house that whirled around him, and sometimes when the whirling stopped, he found that he was going in the wrong direction.

It crossed his befuddled mind that Thad Carmichael had played it smart. Everybody had looked for him to keep hidden out in the Seven Hundred Springs country and whittle on the Mill Iron herds of a night.

Instead, he'd made a bold, deliberate onslaught on the ranch itself, a move calculated to smash the Mill Iron completely. Thad Carmichael had been playing it whole hog or nothing, and though he was no longer here to see it through, the gang of cutthroats and out-trail men he'd spent fifteen years gathering about him were getting the job done. The Mill Iron was doomed.

A wilder yell rose from the ranch house. The shooting quickened. The Mill Iron men were making a break. They couldn't stay in that flaming cabin, so they were breaking out, a dozen in a bunch, hoping to make it to darkness before a slug got them.

Some were. But not many. The outlaw gang was thinning the ranks fast, littering the yard with fallen bodies.

Dale Langtry stiffened, his muddled brain clearing suddenly. Ben Corder was getting away!

The younger Mill Iron owner had cut

to the left the moment the bunch had stormed out of the house. He'd picked him a hole in the ring of crashing gunfire and was making for it, while all eyes were centered on the larger group.

Dale Langtry did not remember running, or climbing a corral fence, or plunging across the creek. But he could remember sucking sounds made by Ben Corder's bootheels in the darkness and how he, himself, kept quartering to cut off the escaping man.

The drizzle of rain was hardly a mist now and the moon had risen behind the clouds, giving a dim light. Dale Langtry ran harder. He had to get past Ben Corder so he could catch him against the light.

He halted suddenly, the blood pounding in his ears. He thought he'd been too late, that Ben Corder had got away. Then behind him, he heard cautious footsteps. He whirled.

"Corder!" called Dale Langtry hoarsely. "This is it, Corder! Dale Langtry!"

BEN CORDER whirled. The sound he made in his throat was like that of a trapped and terrified animal. He jerked his six-shooter and began firing, shooting blindly and triggering fast.

The first shot caught Dale Langtry high up under the left arm, tearing at the flesh and rocking him off balance. With an effort, he straightened himself and the rest of Ben Corder's lead cut at the brush.

The black-butted guns of Thad Carmichael had a balance to them that was perfect. They aimed themselves, like a man pointing his fingers. The action was as smooth as silk. The recoil of them was heavy, but there was little bounce. Ben Corder went down before them as if every bullet were taking effect.

Dale Langtry stood swaying on his feet, the reeking guns still clutched in his fists.

Gradually it dawned on him that the firing had ceased now and men were searching for their mounts. He stood still till he saw the outlaw band load their dead on spare horses, mount, and ride into the darkness. Then he pulled off his brush jumper and carefully rolled Thad Carmichael's guns inside it. Those were beautiful guns and it didn't seem right that they should get wet.

He was trying to stuff the bundle inside his shirt when he pitched face-down on the ground. He turned his head and wiped the mud out of his face. But he didn't try to get up.

There was no hurry now. He'd rest a little bit first. Then he'd get up and catch him a horse and ride in. Or maybe Hopper Taylor would miss him, see the fire and come riding, hunting him. That would be nice. Especially if Hopper had the foresight to bring along his "wage jug" as he called it. That's what he really needed now—a drink of Hopper's wages.

That seemed very funny, and he lay there with the mist falling in his face and grinned at the thought of drinking up all of Hopper Taylor's wages. And then it seemed that he was already back at the cabin and Nina Carmichael was sneaking the jug away from Hopper Taylor and bringing it to him with an impish smile on her face.

Nina was wearing a blue-checked gingham dress he'd seen in old Sod Mercer's general store the day he and Hopper had bought the new Winchesters. Wearing that new dress, new shoes, and a bow of blue ribbon in her hair. A grand little lady. Showing up in them clothes like a new dollar in a mud-hole! Cute as a spotted bug.

Stealing old Hopper's wages right out from under his nose and bringing a man a drink when he needed it. Damned if a girl like that wouldn't do to ride the river with. . . .

Then, somehow, he and Nina Carmichael were riding a bright blue river in a silver boat when gentle hands awoke him at daylight. . . .

It was Hopper Taylor, and with him were old Irv Russell and Henry Wilder and other members of the association.

It made Dale Langtry unreasonably angry to be snatched up out of that silver boat like that and he struggled wildly for a moment. Then they were holding him and Hopper Taylor was lifting his stolen jug to his boss's lips.

"Crazier'n a bed bug," he growled. "Hold still, dammit! Don't spill ary drop. Them's the last of my wages, and Irv claims I stole his last jug!"

THE END

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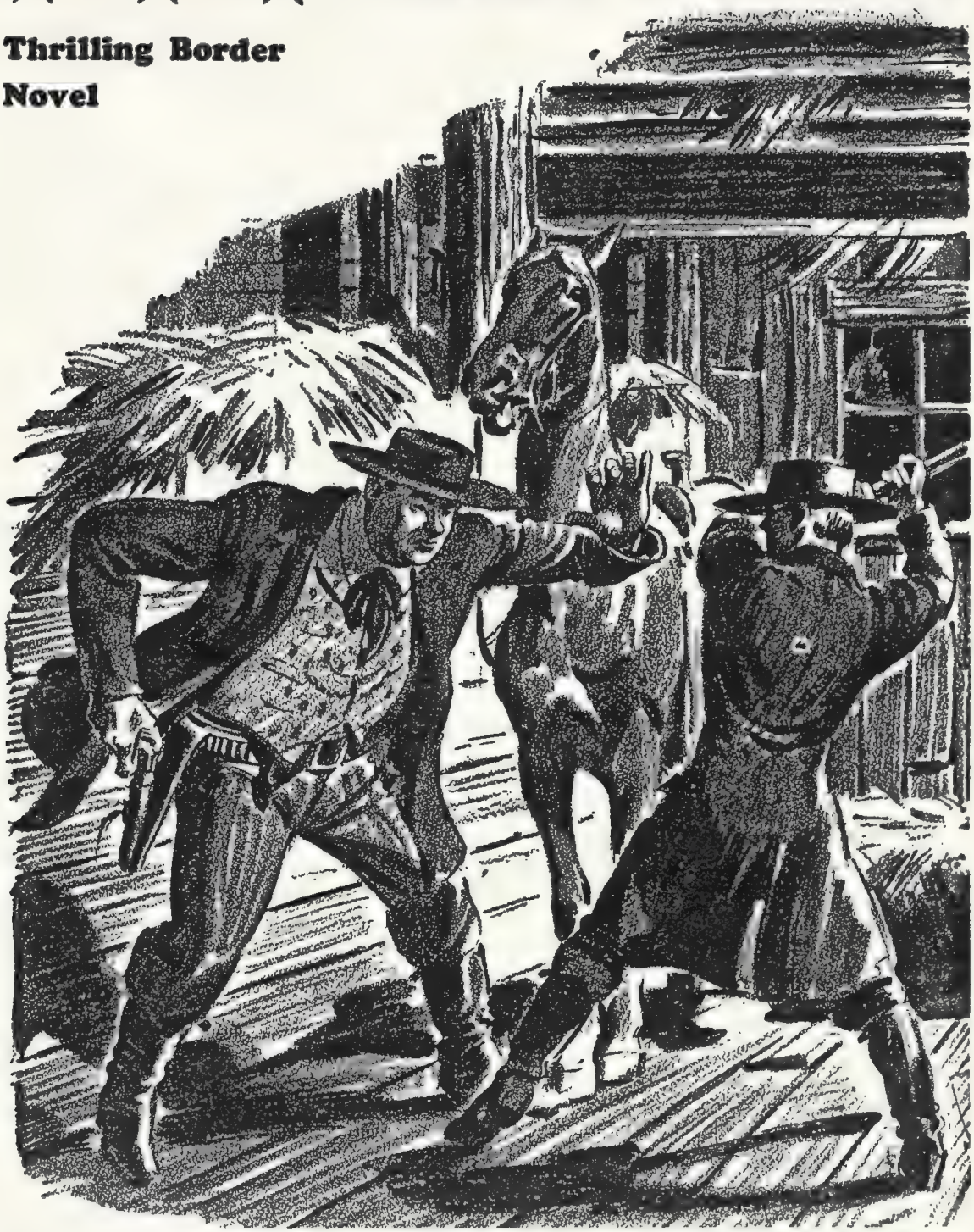
★ ★ ★ DUKE BAGLEY

Thrilling Border Novel



It was like the raffish Duke to take a long-shot gamble for his stolen poker-earnings. But even that frontier Don Quixote would hesitate, had he known that his twisted trail ended in a nest of kill-mad Yaqui renegades, who not only wanted the Duke's golden treasure, but his blood as well!

CHAPTER ONE

The Duke Heads Out

HAVING finally come to El Paso, where hell popped and the Border was convenient, Duke Bagley was uproariously happy. The multifarious

DEALS IN DEATH! ★ ★

By William R. Cox

Marcus said, Bagley, let this be a lesson to you. . . .

deeds of his past paled into insignificance. Kentucky bourbon whiskey was his to drink, the gaming halls were wide open to his talents. El Paso was his oyster.

He sat in the poker game, his mane roached back upon his large head, forehead flushed, the great protruding beak faintly clotted with tiny broken veins; he was a giant of a man, barrel-bodied and formidable. His strange, slim white hands peeled cards from the deck. "Yaas, yaas, indeed! How many tickets, gentlemen? Which way does the devil ride tonight, my gambling fools?"

It was too early for the Duke to have consumed a quart of whiskey, but he was riding the crest that night. He had money in the game. . . .

Pedro Sepulveda, the dark Mexican with the silver buckles and the silken sash full of gold pieces, was there. He was, they said, a very wealthy rancher.

Handy Marcus also toted a wad. Handy was a smallish man, quietly dressed, not quite of the West, nor of the East either for that matter—a man hard to place. If Duke had been completely sober he might have noticed the deepset eyes which were riveted on the Duke's hands while he dealt.

Then there was a young cowman from the next county, Bo Riegel, with a handful of cattle money, and his foreman, tall and saturnine, Skim Drake. Riegel was also drinking and was not in good humor. He sat very stiff and straight, and Duke guessed he was an ex-cavalryman.

The two local tinhorns did not count. They were afraid to make a wrong move and they were cautious with their bets. They were known as Joe and Jake and just made the game six-handed. Duke practically ignored them, concentrating on the money-men.

The yellow chips in front of Duke represented all the money he had in the world, but it was enough. He had just dealt a neat hand, using the seconds and withholding an ace for himself on top of the deck. No one had ever caught the Duke dealing seconds.

Sepulveda said, "One card, señor. Gracias." He was a very polished Mexican gentleman.

Marcus said, "Two for me." His eyes were steady, and he did not examine his draw. He watched the Duke."

Riegel took three, recklessly gambling in a strong pot. Joe and Jake had dropped. Duke said, "I'll just take the top one."

He dropped the sequestered ace upon his small four card straight flush. He beamed upon the others and said, "How about another bottle, gentlemen? Poker is a thirsty game."

Sepulveda bet. Marcus dropped. Riegel, having caught threes, raised. Duke said, "I'll go another hundred, my little chickadees!" and nonchalantly tossed in a yellow chip.

Marcus slapped his cards upon the table. Sepulveda's spiked mustache twitched. He hesitated, staring at Marcus. Then he said in a low voice, "Ah, you are so fortunate, Señor Duke. I must retire."

The Duke's eye did not waver, but suddenly he was very sober. Marcus said, "Yes, such luck is phenomenal. I'm down." He carefully deposited his cards in the center of the table.

Riegel spoke thickly: "I suppose I got to call. Someone's got to keep the damned game honest!" He laughed to show he meant no harm. He was, the Duke decided, a clean-cut, honest lad.

But the Duke was not thinking of Riegel. He was deep in a problem of his own. He knew, because it was his business to know, that both Sepulveda and Marcus were laying down full hands. The Mexican had a full house; Marcus held four deuces. Duke had purposely given them these cards.

He took a deep breath and exposed his hand to Riegel. "Wa'al, wa'al!" he said hoarsely. "I made it. A li'l ole' straight flush, purty as a speckled pup!"

"Amazing," murmured Sepulveda. "I theenk I have had enough."

"Me too," Marcus murmured.

Riegel protested. Joe and Jake faded from view. The Duke spoke cheerily: "Wa'al, now! I sure am sorry, gents. I could go on like this all night." He gathered up his chips and arose, holding them in his hands. He waited for what he expected was coming. They would have to give him a chance to drop the chips and draw—and a chance was all he wanted.

The Mexican and Handy Marcus said nothing. Sepulveda bowed, showing his amazingly perfect white teeth. Then the Duke deliberately turned his back, and went to cash in. He stood at the money table, the sweat pouring down his back. At any moment he could expect a bullet, and he knew it too well. He gathered in the money, seemingly stuffed it all into a belt. Actually he thrust a small handful of gold coins into a pouch which slipped into the pocket of his loose linsey jacket.

He saw a tall, light-haired man with long, bowed arms come in and speak with Riegel, then the two of them went outside. Through the open door he made out a buckboard, and holding the reins was a blonde girl with high, square shoulders, seemingly a very beautiful girl in range clothing. The Duke took in every detail of the picture even as he pretended to down another huge gulp of whiskey.

Sepulveda and Marcus had their heads together in a corner. Two Yaqui Indians, Roman-nosed and bronzed, strolled through the front door and spoke with Sepulveda.

The Duke was bulky, but he could move like a shadow. He began fading from the bar. Marcus and Sepulveda paid no heed. A back door caught his eye. The Duke neared it imperceptibly, then made a leap. He was through a room—startled poker players watched open-mouthed—and out of a window quicker than anyone could have believed possible.

The Duke made a circle, came out upon the street. He hastened to the hotel and did not go upstairs for his gear. His saddle was in the barn and Petey, his big black horse, whinnied softly. Duke had the bridle on and was smoothing the saddle blanket when a hard object poked him in the kidneys and the low, sibilant voice said, "We'll take that belt, Fatty, right now!"

★

THE Duke raised his hands, slanting his eyes back over his shoulder. There were the two Yaquis, both brandishing drawn Colts. And there was Handy Marcus, holding a rifle in both hands. Marcus went on, "You're slick, Bagley. But it could only be you dealing those hands. The others haven't the sense or the skill. You didn't think you'd get away with it, did you?"

The Duke murmured, "Wa'al, wa'al. A stick-up, eh? I misjudged you, Marcus. Thought you might force a shoot-out—but I didn't expect this."

Marcus said, "Shut up! And let's have that belt."

With the two Indians watching, there was nothing else to do. The Duke reached for his ivory-handled Colt, then held it. He could not take a chance in a lightning sweep at the rifle. He fumbled with the money belt, dropping it on the floor. Marcus stepped back and one of the Yaquis picked it up. Petey stood motionless, but his eyes seemed to recognize something wrong.

Marcus said, "You're a four-flushing, tub-gut tinhorn, Bagley. That stuff is worn out on the Border. Let this be a lesson to you not to fool with men."

The muzzle of the rifle swung viciously. Duke took it full alongside the head. He went down as though shot. Petey squealed and lashed out with his heels, but one of the Indians swung a quirt and Petey retreated. A voice said, "Hurry! Someone comes."

Marcus snatched up the belt. He followed the Indians out into the yard. In a moment they were on horses and moving westward and southward from El Paso.

Some time later the Duke sat up. A Negro stable-hand was staring at him, holding a lantern high. Petey was snorting and stomping. Duke said, "Yaas, indeed! First time in my life. Wa'al, wa'al. There's always a first time, people do say. They really got me."

"Huh?" said the Negro.

Duke found whiskey where he had placed it on a shelf before he began to saddle Petey. He drained the bottle and his head stopped spinning. There was a terrible welt over his ear, but his Stetson had saved him a cracked skull, he thought. He gingerly replaced his hat and threw the hull over Petey's broad back.

He knew better than to stay around El Paso. If Marcus could command two Yaquis, he could gather more. Duke knew about Yaquis. They were utterly fearless, the only unconquered tribe of Indians on the North American continent. He wanted no truck with them.

He mounted, groaning a little. He was sure that there'd come another day with Marcus when a reckoning could be had. The Duke had waited twenty years in his time for a crack at an enemy. But for now, while he had the coins sequestered in his jacket pocket, the thing to do was to get to another town and recoup at the gaming tables.

He put his hand in his coat pocket to reassure himself. He withdrew it, empty.

That Handy Marcus had eyes like a hawk, all right. The Duke's sleight of hand had never fooled him.

The Duke reached into his vest and pulled out a couple of little red balls. Before the astonished eyes of the colored boy, he juggled them until they were a blinding flash of scarlet in the lamplight. They came back to Duke's left hand, he

spread them between his fingers, they became three, four red balls. He made a pass and they were back to two.

He did not try to do the one-to-four-to-one routine. That night he did not have the confidence. He rode Petey out of the barn, tossing his last four-bit piece to the stable boy. He was dead broke, without even a pint of whiskey.

He rode to the west out of El Paso.

CHAPTER TWO

Duke Bagley's Revolution

FROM the hilltop the view was perfect. All around lay flat grazing land, timber, swelling little streams, fine lush grass. The valley was fertile and good for cattle, an oasis in scrub country, otherwise not worth a nickel. There were two outfits, clearly enough defined, sharing the good country. The cattle nibbled and were content, longhorns such as were seldom seen in Texas.

The nearest ranch was the larger, but neither was of great size. They were neat and looked comfortable and Duke was hungry. He rode down to the smaller of the two, noting that the brands of the amicably mingled herds were T Bar and Tomahawk. There was smoke arising from the chimney of what he took to be Tomahawk.

He reined in and Petey cocked his head, sniffling for oats. Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. Just a minute, Petey. You'll be fed. . . ."

He saw through the window that there were only three men to handle this small outfit. One was a Mexican. The other was Skim Drake. And the third was Bo Riegel.

Duke clapped his heels into Petey and swung away. He heard a cheery call behind him, an invitation, but he did not stop. He bent low, making himself small in the saddle and rode for the next ranch. He had no way of knowing how much Marcus and his friend Sepulveda had talked last night. . . .

He came into the T Bar and Petey was not so unhappy. He hallooed and the back door opened and a girl smiled at him. He recognized her as the one he had seen in the buckboard in El Paso. Behind her stood the tall, saddle-bowed man.

Duke said, "Howdy, folks."

"Light and eat," invited the girl.

Duke lit with alacrity. A man came and showed him the stable. There was a small bunkhouse and the man, who was dead-panned and not young, announced himself as Billy Poker, the foreman. Duke was affable, turning on the charm. He strolled back to the house, dusting his boots with his rebosa, making himself presentable.

The girl said, "I'm Helga. Yonder is my poppa, Jan Dormund. This is the T Bar. She had a trifle of accent which was charming.

Jan Dormund had the bluest eyes Duke had ever seen. He said almost bashfully, "How-do, stranger?"

"Just call me Duke," said the stout man cheerily. "I'm a wanderer, in search of employment. Not a cow-hand, of course. I am—er—I am a mining engineer."

"No mines here," smiled Jan. "But food, plenty."

"Yaas, indeed. Not hungry, of course. . . . But we can always eat. Yaas!" said the Duke.

The kitchen held the largest stove he had ever seen. Helga did the cooking, and he ate. After the twentieth pancake with plenty of black-strap and white, fresh butter, he could talk again. He said, "See you got a close neighbor, there. Riegel, isn't it?"

Helga said, "Yes, Bo Riegel." She blushed a little and Jan Dormund smiled.

Duke said, "Nice boy—met him in town."

Jan Dormund said, "Ya. You cheated him at poker, eh?"

Duke's fork held a chunk of side meat, but he did not fail to put it accurately in his mouth. He chewed for a moment and said, "Wa'al, it was like this: I didn't go to cheat the boy. Meant to return his money."

Dormund's blue eyes were like agates. "You rode past the Tomahawk, fast. You came here."

"Now wait," said the Duke. He pushed back from the table, but it was too late. The Swede rancher had a gun in his lap and his big hand was very steady. Duke said plaintively, "I'm losin' my grip.

Yaas, indeed. Last night they bushwhacked me. Today I get stuck up while I feed."

"Search him, Helga," said Jan flatly.

The girl's hands were warm and strong, patting his pockets and looking for the money belt. She said quietly, "He has not got any money."

"His saddle-bags?" asked Dormund.

The hard-faced Billy Poker sauntered through the door. He held a shotgun in his hands and Duke shuddered, knowing he had been covered with that lethal weapon at every moment, thinking what might have happened had he attempted to jump Dormund. The foreman said, "Not a thin shinplaster. He's clean."

Jan Dormund said, "You had better talk, mister."

Duke sighed. He told them about the poker game, and what followed. He showed them the welt beneath his thick hair. He ended, "I just want a crack at Marcus and Sepulveda. They were crooking the game when I began to cross them. They are very slick people."

Jan Dormund put away his revolver. Billy Poker rested the shotgun in a corner. Outside there was the sound of hoofs and a T Bar rider named Tedito, a half-breed Mexican, came into the yard leading Skim Drake and Bo Riegel.

They gathered on the veranda, and Duke noted that the girl sat close to the saturnine, glowering Riegel. Jan Dormund said, "You are a rascal, Bagley. In the old country there is a saying, 'set a thief to catch a thief'. You do not like Marcus and Sepulveda, therefore we will hire you. The T Bar and Tomahawk will pay you fighting wages."

Duke said, "Wa'all, Wa'all! Yaas, indeed! What's the deal?"

Bo Riegel snapped, "I don't like this Jan!" The dark, handsome young man was inimical, Duke felt. The girl's hand clasped his arm in a tight grasp but he did not respond.

Dormund's expression did not change, his eyes did not leave the Duke although he addressed Bo Riegel. "You spent all yesterday with Marcus and learned nothing. You've lost as much cattle as we have. Your man Charley Rose got shot in the back, no? As did my man, Johnny One-Ace. Marcus wants the T Bar and the Tomahawk. Our beeves go over the Border. We do nothing, because we can prove nothing. What is it you do not like, Bo?"

"This fat character," snapped Riegel. "This Bagley."

"I am not too fond of him myself," nodded Dormund. "But he slickered Marcus."

"And didn't get away with it," growled Riegel. "We ought to hang him, then gun Marcus and anyone connected with him and be done with it."

"Guns," sighed Dormund. "In the old country it was peaceful."

"And dull and poor and mean," said Helga suddenly. "This man who eats so much, what can he do?"

"Ride south," said Dormund promptly. "Cross the Border. Learn where our cattle goes. Perhaps lead us to the thieves."

Duke said, "Yaas indeed! When did you lose the last steers?"

"Day before yesterday," said Riegel peevishly. "Marcus and Sepulveda were in town at the time. Make somethin' of that."

"Marcus wants these ranches," insisted Jan Dormund softly. He was a man of strong conviction, Duke recognized. His bent shoulders were powerful, his long arms ended in huge, work-hardened hands. He was a man of latent power and he could control Riegel, the foreman; all of them. Even the girl listened when he spoke. "I am convinced that Sepulveda is with him in the deal. Bagley can ride and Tedito will accompany him."

Duke looked at the half-breed, Tedito. He was a slim youth, with slanting eyes which told of Yaqui blood. He wore one gun and a machete slung at his saddle, sharper than a razor. He had very white teeth and straight black hair and a tiny scar on his left cheek. Tedito said, "Si. I gladly go."

Riegel stood up abruptly. "I got a fence to mend. Skim needs me at the ranch. I'll pay my share—but I don't like it."

He left, and Tedito's eyes followed him thoughtfully. The girl was slightly pale, watching the young rancher ride away. Jan Dormund, expressionless, sent Billy Poker on an errand.

He said, "I have only two other men left. They are Colly Malone and a boy called Kid Boots. If you see them, they will recognize the password, 'Sweden.' Here is one hundred dollars—your first month's wages. I will also pay reasonable expenses from my own pocket."

Duke pocketed the gold. He said, "You want information, my friend. You shall have it."

Jan Dormund looked thoughtfully at the impeccable blue sky above Texas. He said, "I want peace and quiet, Duke Bagley. You may be able to bring them to me. I will pay well for it."

"Yaas," murmured the Duke. "Yaas, indeed." In that moment he sensed the depths of this Swedish rancher. Here was a careful man, but one who would stop at nothing. Here was a deep man, a strong one, who could send another man to his death without a qualm.

The gold coins clanked in his pocket, and the Duke knew he had hired out to a strange character indeed. . . .

★

THEY rode that day and at night they had come close to the Border. It was a thirsty ride, but the Duke's eyes cleared marvelously and his busy mind began to perk up. He had lived his forty-odd years by his wits and his understanding of other men. While Tedito made camp he lounged, thinking over this jackpot into which he had blundered.

He was between two fires, he knew very well. Twice that day he made suggestions about their route which would have carried him near a town and a bottle of whiskey. Tedito, a polite young fellow, had carefully steered him southward over an untraveled trail. Twenty years ago Duke had been in this country, and he remembered well the mountain fastnesses across the Line into which they were headed. He remembered the Yaquis, and their peculiar method of torture.

Now he thought of the two Indians who had helped in his humiliation in El Paso. He remembered the dark hue of Pedro Sepulveda. Dormund had spoken at length of cattle stolen without a trace of their going, of shapes in the night which had frightened all but the hardiest riders away from the T Bar and the Tomahawk. Bo Riegel's surliness was that of a man pushed into a corner by hidden, secret forces.

And the Duke was in the exact middle between these terrible legions of evil and an indomitable Swede, who was determined to hold onto his own come what may. He had no illusions about Jan Dormund. The blue-eyed man would kill as quick as Sepulveda or Marcus. Duke never missed a bet in reading character.

Tedito said, "There is a T Bar herd over yonder, in the cut. I will ride and tell Colly and the Keed we are here. Otherwise. . . ." He grinned and made a swift motion of cutting a throat. The T Bar men were spooky, Duke gathered. Tedito rode his small, tough blue roan into the gathering dusk, going west.

Duke called, "Why, sure! I'll start supper, amigo."

He got up slowly. Tedito disappeared. Duke seized his saddle blanket. In a moment he was aboard Petey and riding south.

The long-legged black could cover ground like a jackrabbit. They hit the Border, and Duke hesitated. He could ride east, circle and strike civilization and a poker game. He had one hundred dollars in gold that Dormund had given him and surely a Handy Marcus could not appear twice hand-running to spoil his graft. He could recoup his fortunes and proceed along his vagrant way, always hoping to hit a jackpot and open a place of his own, with plenty of bourbon and gaming tables galore, and maybe a blonde dancer or two. . . .

He put Petey into the stream. Behind him he thought he heard the faint sound of gunshots. He went into Mexico, loosening his rifle in its scabbard. Somehow, he could not turn away from the trail of Handy Marcus and Pedro Sepulveda.

He had thought himself impervious to insult, but beyond the business back in El Paso, the additional sting of having walked into a cut at the T Bar added too much to the burden. It was time to take a bold hand—and a lone hand, without the ubiquitous Tedito to tell him what Dormund wanted him to do.

Petey trotted along the road. There was the familiar height of Mount Aztec

on his right, and Duke thought he knew of a small town which might be reached before dawn. He could lay up all day, then travel again at night and avoid detection, he figured. . . .

He felt rather than saw movement to his right. He reined the black horse off the trail and snatched at his rifle. There was a clump of mesquite and he dismounted, leading Petey, admonishing the intelligent steed into silence.

Muffled hoofs clumped down from the mountains. Three Indians gathered, speaking in Spanish, guarding the road. Duke distinguished the names, "Dormund. . . . Don Pedro. . . . Fatty Man. . . ."

LET'S QUIT KIDDING OURSELVES!

Even though, in some quarters, news is good, it still looks like a long war, a tough and bitter struggle for the survival of you and me and our families! Defeat means our wipe-out as a Nation—a meager, miserable existence as slaves under the ruthless rule of Axis gangsters. Buying U. S. War Savings Bonds and Stamps will help insure our victory and freedom. Buy them every pay-day!

"Yaas," he muttered. "Know everything, they do. Yaas, indeed."

One of the Yaquis melted away, the other two yawned and spoke of cattle. They were very satisfied with themselves. The taller said, "Don Pedro will soon be *presidente*. Then we will rule again. Our ancestors will rest in peace. . . ."

He reined his stubby pony off the road and the third went ahead, cautiously, over the route Duke had just traversed. The tall one came directly for the mesquite where Duke crouched. He was evidently going to take up his guard at that spot.

Duke held his breath. Petey was a silent dark shape, knowing, waiting. The Yaqui came around into view against the deep blue sky. Duke slammed his rifle barrel in a full swing.

The Yaqui ducked, caught the blow on his arm, came under the barrel. Amazingly, he did not shout. Duke kicked with the heel of his boot. The Indian described a backward parabola. The Duke's rifle-butt clanked against skull.

"Dead Injun," murmured Duke. "Yaas, indeed. Petey, we shall go!"

He mounted the horse. He rode southward still. He avoided the trail, but kept parallel with it, he thought, on the eastern side. By dawn he had passed the place where the town he thought he remembered should have been.

He was very hungry and thirsty. He found a cave in a foothill and there was some grass and water for Petey. Duke drank water also, shuddering. He would have given his entire hundred dollars for a quart of whiskey—no two guards. One wouldn't suffice after this long drought. . . .

He slept well, however. At nightfall he was ready to travel again. He crossed the road, finally, going towards the mountains. He came to a terrain which was strange to him and in which it was dangerous to ride, but pushed stubbornly on. He had not seen a human habitation since crossing the Border. He wondered if he should have stayed with Tedito after all.

Then he saw the flicker of the fire in the deep ravine below Mount Aztec. He stood in his stirrups, his belt pulled to the last notch and stared. If he had ridden another ten years he would have missed that beacon. He rode back and ascertained that ten yards before he could not have seen it.

It was, then, a hideout.

He tied Petey to a tree and took his rifle with him, walking down the slope and between two high sentinel rocks. The ground broadened and leveled. It was covered with cropped grass. Under the Duke's feet were imprints of many hoofs.

He knelt, feeling about, and knew there were cattle ahead. The fire was brighter now, and he could smell coffee and bacon. His nostrils quivered. He crept forward, seeking shelter. The trees were scrubby and no concealment for his bulk. He should pass this up, reserving it for future investigation, he knew. But he was hungry, and ahead was food.

He saw the three men about the fire. They were all Yaquis. They were bronzed and husky and quick as cats as they moved about their tasks.

Duke sighed. There was no way to get around these Indians, he knew. They knew all about him, according to what he had heard back on the trail. They were herding stolen cattle and would be ready to shoot, in any case. It would be simpler to take food from a wildcat.

As he watched, two more Yaquis came in. Duke started, recognizing them in the firelight. They were the pair who had stood behind Marcus in the stable at El Paso. They engaged the others in excited conversation. Then they rode past the spot where Duke was hidden, made an oblique turn, just missed finding Petey and rode south.

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DUKE made a beeline for his horse. He climbed aboard, without a backward glance at the still gesticulating guards. He followed the sound of the two who rode ahead, and it was a difficult job in the darkness. The night was unrelieved by moonlight, and all about him danger lurked. He was two hundred yards behind them when the two turned again and struck a trail across country. Duke followed.

Then the outbuildings of the Sepulveda ranch loomed in the night, and the whinny of horses in a corral. Beyond was a huge house, which was lighted and from which came the strains of stringed music. Men moved about and the two he had been following turned over their horses and clanked to the big house.

Petey stood sixteen hands high, but he could be a shadow. He stood close to the tall windows and Duke precariously mounted to a standing position in the saddle. There was a window which gave a fine view of the interior of the room where the music was being played. Duke clung to the sill and looked. There was plenty to look at.

It was a luxurious room, filled with magnificent mahogany furniture, hung with velvet and silk. The musicians were clad in frilled white silk blouses and slashed trousers trimmed with silver conchos. At a round table sat a gay party and a wine carafe went around until Duke's tongue was down on his chest. There were a dozen people, men and women, all enjoying themselves hugely over the remains of a sumptuous repast.

Pedro Sepulveda had a dark, svelt woman on either side of him. Handy Marcus was equally favored. A swarthy man in a uniform was at the table, and a lean, sinister-faced fellow with a spiked mustache, who pinched a stout girl until she squealed. The window was down and Duke could not hear what was said, which was annoying.

Then the two Indians entered. They stood very straight, after the manner of the Yaquis, without humility. The officer frowned, but Sepulveda stood and addressed them civilly. They responded, without emotion. Sepulveda looked grave, then smacked his fist against his palm and gave orders. But to the Duke, it was all in pantomime.

The two Indians departed. Sepulveda sat down and spread his lean hands upon the table, talking earnestly to the others. They listened, and Marcus nodded approval. The Duke nearly fell off the black horse, straining his ears to no avail.

It was no use. He got down, and he was no wiser than before. He rode Petey to the rear of the house. Someone addressed him in Spanish and he answered in the same language, laconically. It was too dark to recognize anyone, which was good. He saw the two Yaquis momentarily in the light from a bunkhouse door. He went swiftly away from that building and came to a little kitchen set apart from the house.

The smell of food was overpowering. He climbed down and placed Petey in a deep shadow alongside the building and went quietly to the door. He pushed it open and entered.

There he stopped dead in the dim light of a lantern which hung from a hook in the ceiling. The slim youth at the table was Tedito. Tedito leaped, opening his mouth to yell. A stout Indian woman had been waiting upon him.

Duke stepped and swung. Into his hand had come by magic his long-barreled Colt. It caught Tedito in the mouth and silenced him. The Duke's hands seized the

Yaqui and lifted him, reversed him, and banged his head upon the floor. There was a crack of vertebra, and Tedito lay in a heap upon the packed dirt.

The Indian woman said in Spanish: "I always said he would come to a bad end. Are you from the Swede man?"

Duke was already seizing a tortilla, cramming it into his mouth. It was hotter than fire, but there was a wine flagon. He slaked his thirst and said, "Old one, who are you?"

"The Swede man is very strong," she said wisely. "When he was in Mexico, he was very nearly conquered."

Duke said, "You mean Jan Dormund was down here one time?"

"Cattle he owned," she nodded. "But he was a lone one, and the Yaquis hated him. Don Pedro out-bargained him."

Duke ate some beans. He said, "Wa'all, wa'all! Yaas, indeed."

He took the three red balls from his vest. He juggled them expertly. The woman watched with eyes that seemed to have seen everything and could not be stirred. He did the four-to-one, then back to four again, spreading the balls between his fingers.

The woman said, "You will be killed, of course. Don Pedro has the Yaquis for allies."

Duke said, "Don Pedro Sepulveda is a Yaqui himself."

She shook her head. "Only three-quarters. But he has them. Some of them will do what he says."

Duke said, "He is about to start a revolution?"

"Si, señor," she nodded. "And that is bad. Killing, burning. . . . What is there for us, the people?"

Duke said, "Maybeso we could stop it, eh, my little beauty? Yaas, indeed. If we could summon the Swede man, eh?"

"I had hoped," she said sadly. "He was a very strong man." Her eyes lighted for a moment and then Duke saw that she was not really old, nor too bad-looking.

Duke said cautiously, "Of course there is his daughter. . . ."

The woman looked blank. "He has no child."

Duke nodded, "Yaas, indeed. My mistake. A niece, no doubt."

He was putting it together piece by piece. He almost had it now. He understood many things—the sullenness and distrust of Bo Riegel, the silent stealing of cattle from the two ranches across the Line, many things. He knew why Jan Dormund had not meant for him to go freely, that Tedito had been designated as his guardian—perhaps his murderer. . . . Only his own predilection for traveling alone had saved him.

Yes, it was all becoming quite clear. It was a fine situation, one which Duke could handle—if he lived. But as the woman had said—of course, he would be killed! The Yaquis. . . .

The Duke nodded his head toward Tedito. He said, "Could we hide this carrion, for a while, beautiful señora?"

The woman nodded indifferently. Duke ate the last of the beans. She turned out the light and opened a rear door. Duke picked up the body of Tedito and carried him, following the woman. There was a cabin, deserted, at the end of a line in which lived the peons who served Don Pedro. In a corner stood a sort of bin for storage. They crammed Tedito therein and Duke took Tedito's sharp, needle pointed stiletto, thrusting it into his belt.

They went outside and for a moment Duke was irresolute. The woman stood close to him and murmured, "Benito and José came in with news. The Yaquis are ready to join the army of the pig Renaldo."

Duke nodded. Renaldo must be the officer he had seen in the house. The woman went on, "With Feliz Gonzales, Don Pedro and the Yaquis, the big general would be dangerous."

Duke said, "I'll ride north."

"Si," she said. "All gringos ride north —if they live."

"But I'll be back," said Duke grimly. "Yaas, indeed."

"They never come back," she said.

Duke hesitated. He said, "You won't get into trouble, will you? Ah—about Tedito?"

"Trouble?" she said. "Long ago the Swede want away. What care I about trouble? He was a strong Swede man. . . ."

Duke said, "Oh! Yaas, indeed! Wa'all, thank you, ma'am. I'll be ridin'!"

He tiptoed around the edge of the now

darkened kitchen. Petey was standing quite still. He was swinging up into the saddle when he saw the man coming around the corner of the house. He leaned down and struck with Tedito's knife. The man gurgled and went down.

For a moment Duke thought there were more of them. But it was only a couple who had been drinking too much, going arm in arm to their quarters. There must have been a hundred men on the place, besides the Yaquis, Duke thought. He held Petey down, walking him to avoid suspicion.

They went past the big house. They merged with the outer darkness. Petey pricked up his ears and struck a swift pace, breaking north.

CHAPTER THREE

Bait for a Yaqui Trap!

THE hidden ravine was not too difficult to find by daylight. Duke rode by it at once, recognized that he had gone too far, then retreated. He came to the entrance and concealed Petey in a thicket before entering. From his saddle-bags he took the binoculars won from an army officer long ago and carried them to the top of the hill. He squirmed along, careful not to expose himself against the skyline, trailing his rifle.

It was a hard existence for the luxury-loving Duke. He was sweating off pounds of flesh and his belt showed new holes punched with Tedito's stiletto. Petey was gaunt from a diet of only grass and water —Petey was also accustomed to fine fodder. But there was an item that needed checking before the Duke could be entirely certain of things.

He located one of the taciturn herders, then the other two. They were slumped in the sun, sitting their Spanish stock saddles, half asleep. Duke adjusted the glasses and turned them upon the cattle below.

He could easily trace the brands. He could see the lop ears sliced in the Mexican fashion. He could read the markings of the irons, S-S. There wasn't a single T Bar or Tomahawk in that valley, he would be willing to bet his still intact hundred dollars.

He grunted with satisfaction. So far, two and two equalled four. He had only to go back to the Border now and give out his information. Then he could slip back and visit the nearest federal at a garrison. He had never been in a war. Unprofitable, he had always thought them. But so long as Handy and Don Pedro were on the other side, he would have an interest, highly personal, in the impending conflict.

He wriggled his way back to Petey. He was about to get away to the north when he heard the clatter of horses, a shrill Indian yell of triumph. He leveled his gun, but the sound had not come from the canyon behind him. He again dismounted, holding Petey's head, peering.

Over the trail came a band of riders. There were six Yaquis. José and Benito were two of them. There were three others who were tied to their saddles, jolting about, trying to maintain balance with hands bound behind them.

One was Helga Dormund. The others were Bo Riegel and his foreman, Skim Drake, the lean man. They were prisoners of the Indians.

While Duke watched, the caravan went by heading for the ranch of Don Pedro Sepulveda. He stood stunned unable for the moment to make up his mind which way he should go.

While he waited, they were gone, swiftly into the night, leaving one of their number behind to inform the herders of the passage of events. Time passed, yet something held the Duke silent in his hiding place. The pieces of the pattern were not quite fitted in his mind.

Then there was the rumble of wheels, and the messenger came out of the canyon and hailed a man riding ahead of a pair of wagons drawn by tall mules. They exchanged cheerful greetings, and soon all had gone towards the Sepulveda hacienda.

The Duke was satisfied now. In the darkness he pulled out the red balls and his hands were magical, juggling them. He murmured to Petey, "Yaas, indeed! Now we know. The Swede man is a very strong hombre, all right. And very smart. But he has dealt himself into a jackpot and does not hold the aces. Yaas, indeed!"

Petey picked up his ears and did a

nervous step or two. Duke remembered how the face of the blonde girl had been piteous in the febrile light of the torches. On the backtrail there would be Jan Dormund, and the Duke wanted very badly to see that blue-eyed gentleman. But at the Sepulveda rancho there were Yaquis who loved to torture gringos.

"Yaas," said Duke. "Pull devil, haul baker. We got a hundred dollars, haven't we? What more do we need—if we live?"

But Petey turned his nose towards the ranch. The trail was becoming very familiar now. Duke rode hard, yet not swiftly enough to pass the wagons nor the prisoners who rode ahead with the Yaqui band. It was necessary to keep a watchful eye for roving bands of the night-riding fearless Indians. Twice he nearly was caught, but each time the fleet, deft feet of Petey carried him out of danger.

He approached circuitously this time, coming in behind the small kitchen, past the cottage in which Tedito was concealed. Petey was willing to stand again, apparently tied to the rail at the corral gate. The Duke rummaged in his saddle bags and found a spare cartridge belt, full of shells for a Winchester and a .45 revolver which he unwrapped from oiled cloths.

He reluctantly stowed away his rifle with its soft-nosed bullets. This would demand rapid shooting rather than accuracy, he thought.

He was alone and surrounded by a hundred hostile men plus a general of the rebel army and his murdering aide, plus two men who had already once outwitted him. If ever he had been in a jackpot, this was it. He cheerfully admitted it to Petey, whispering, "Might be the finish. Never did like the deal. Don Pedro and Handy—my nemesis, that combination, eh, hoss?"

Petey softly nuzzled his sleeve. "No sentiment!" said Duke merrily. "Play out the hand—that's all we know."

He walked slowly towards the brilliantly lit house. He was a ponderous man with an ambling gait, slightly worn by the years, more than a little whiskey-sodden. He had two remarkable hands and a devious brain. He had divined skullduggery and was quite sure of his deductions. If he could overcome the huge forces arrayed against him, he could collect heavily, he felt. He was not unhappy.

THE windows were too high from the ground for a decent view of the interior of the big room. He circled and came to the rear. There was a kitchen, now dim and deserted except for the stout woman who sat upon a chair, stony-faced, indifferent to fate.

The Duke stepped through, carrying his rifle, laden with the .45 revolver and the cartridge belts. The sloe eyes of the woman surveyed him without expression. Then she said, "You came back, eh? You follow the blonde one!"

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. Friends of mine."

"They heat the irons," said the woman indifferently. "Your fat would sizzle well."

"The Swede man is my friend. He is in this," said Duke. "He'll be coming back before it's ended."

The woman shrugged. "That was long ago. I am no longer interested." She heaved to her feet and started for the rear door. One finger pointed and she said, "That is the way. Go with God."

Duke was alone in the kitchen. He listened at the door to the hallway. There were sounds in the front, voices quarreling, then the dominating accents of Don Pedro.

Bo Riegel said explosively. "The hell with you and your Yaquis!"

Duke went down the hall on tiptoes. He paused outside a half-opened door. The musicians had been sent away with the women. Bo Riegel was standing with his back to the fireplace. Helga sat upon a straight chair, her hands bound. Skim Drake leaned against the wall, his saturnine countenance ready for death.

The general was frowning and Feliz Gonzales sat near his elbow, whispering. Marcus and Sepulveda were behind the table, like two sitting in judgment.

Handy said, "You were too smart, Riegel. You have to pay for it."

"If you were a man I'd ask you to turn loose the girl," said Riegel hopelessly.

Handy shrugged. "She is also too smart. I offered to buy your ranch. You needn't have been in this deal."

Riegel said, "You can't get away with it."

Sepulveda smiled thinly. "It seems we already have succeeded, Señor Riegel, in getting away with it."

"You didn't get father!" cried Helga. "You're not free yet, you murdering crooks!"

Sepulveda sighed. "I could almost claim the girl. She has fire. But my Yaquis—I indulge them, and they are faithful. Take them away, José."

The Yaquis closed in, forcing the three out of the house. Skim Drake stumbled and José thrust the point of a sharp knife into his shoulder blade. Marcus shifted uneasily, but Sepulveda warned: "It will be worse. Their screams will haunt you. To buy the Yaquis costs much gold, my friend."

The Duke had heard enough. He retraced his steps. He came into the kitchen and padded through and out the back door. He skirted the house and saw the prisoners taken into a log building, heard the rattle of chains as they were secured. He heard the girl cry out once, and then Riegel was cursing. They would not kill the captives so easily. There would be a big pow-wow and many ceremonial performances before the gringos died.

Retreating to the corral, he found Petey still standing, unharmed. There were so many horses about that no one had paid particular attention to the saddled animal which seemed to be waiting for a messenger to come and ride him away. Duke waited, leaning against the rail, his elbows hooked. Several men passed and re-passed, but no one accosted him.

The lights in the big house remained lit, shedding soft radiance over the adjacent ground. Yaquis went in and came out. Sepulveda had them, all right. He gave them the freedom which those wild creatures demanded, and they would be loyal to him. They were the natural rebels of Mexico; brave, cruel, canny. In them Sepulveda had the means to conquer the country, if he could control his artillery and other forces.

There was not time to ride to the nearest federal garrison, the Duke knew. It was necessary to rescue the prisoners, then to organize some kind of diversion and get away for the Border. Jan Dormund would be coming soon, and Duke wanted to be away before the big Swede got into it with Sepulveda and Marcus. There were reasons why he should not be in that melée.

He could ride away, of course, and let it go at that. It was not his fault that Riegel had allowed himself to get caught. The girl meant nothing to Duke. He was clearly not bound to stick his neck into a noose—nor his fat against a Yaqui hot iron!

The Mexican night was cool and the sky was lightening as clouds drifted over Mount Aztec. A softness in the air was pleasant, almost soporific. The Duke could have used some sleep. He stepped away from the corral fence and went forward. This, he admitted, was the strangest adventure of all—in that he was sticking in the pot with no cards to which he could draw and the stakes not upon the table; except the ante, of course. And his own ante was—his life!

CHAPTER FOUR

The Duke Hires On

HE FOUND the wagons without trouble. They were near a huge barn, the tarpaulin pulled tight, covering even the driver's seats. There was a lurking Yaqui with lynx eyes and Duke did not go close. He went to the out-kitchen instead and lingered in its shelter. The night was becoming too bright and he cursed the breeze which had dispelled the clouds. The log prison was a hundred yards away from his hiding place. . . .

There was no guard for the prison. The chains were considered strong enough, and the place was littered with restless Indians. Only the Duke's casual procedure, plus his ability to move quickly from sight, had so far kept him safe from questioning. He watched the square, sturdy building for a half hour. He was growing restless now, fearful that dawn would come too soon.

He saw the tall man ride in from the south, dismount and stare about. He saw the Yaquis closing in. The man broke into a run. The Yaquis—there were three

of them—slid forward to intercept him. The Duke muttered, "It's Dormund, all right. Yaas, indeed! Didn't think he'd come all the way in. Guess she's his daughter-in-law, after all!"

He stepped out of the kitchen. The Yaquis were wielding knives and one tugged at a shiny, nickel-plated pistol. The Duke drew Tedito's blade and crouched. Jan Dormund ran past him to the shed. The Yaquis were lined up for a moment, ready to pounce all at once, like sleek brown cats. Dormund swung, his back to the wall, hauling out a long revolver.

The Duke used the razor edge of the machete, wishing he had also found Tedito's machete for this occasion. He growled, "No gun-fire, you fool! Mow 'em down!" His big arms flailed and the cutting edge found flesh. The Yaqui with the gun stumbled, almost decapitated. The other went down like a felled ox.

Then Dormund was using his gun barrel for a club and the third Indian hit dirt. Duke said urgently. "Into the kitchen with 'em, man! This ain't good."

"So you are alive," said Dormund calmly, heaving a body through the door. "I see Tedito is not so fortunate. You use his knife well."

"You double-crossin' damn' squarehead!" said Duke. "It ain't your fault. Thought I was a government man, did you?"

Dormund shrugged. "Alas, yes! It was an error, eh?"

Duke said, "I'm as crooked as you are, you thick-headed dummy! Your gal and her man are over yonder, chained."

Dormund produced a file. "Sepulveda always uses chains. I came prepared. He did not pay me for the guns, you know. It is an old feud."

"Serves you right for doin' business with your enemies," said Duke virtuously. "And for not takin' Riegel in on it."

"He wouldn't come in if he knew," said Dormund. "He is a stubborn fellow. Very honest. Patriotic, too."

Duke nodded, "A simpleton! Yaas, indeed. And now you got yourself in the middle on account of your daughter. And I'm here because—well, never mind that for now. And we got to get them loose and create a hell of a diversion."

Dormund gestured towards the wagons. "And get out the guns and shells. There is a fortune in them."

Duke said admiringly, "It was a cute stunt! Yaas, indeed! The Yaquis came over the Border and stole the cattle. Marcus sells 'em to Eastern packers. The money pays for arms to start a revolution which'll turn the Yaquis loose. Everybody thinks the cattle are driven back into Mexico—but actually it is driven right to the railroad and shipped east. You get paid for your T Bar stock. But Riegel and all the others along the Border get trimmed."

"Riegel was to marry my Helga," shrugged Dormund. "He would get it back. . . . You guessed it good, Bagley. Now what do we do?"

Duke took a deep breath. He said, "There's a woman here. She knew you when. Kinda fat now, but speaks well for a cook."

Dormund passed his big hand over the flat planes of his hard face. His eyes were very bright. "That would be Rosa."

"May be," nodded Duke. "She knows the place."

Dormund said, "The Yaquis are confabbing. They heat irons."

Duke took out the red balls and juggled them. Time was getting very short. At dawn someone would enter the cook shed and be greeted by the sight of Yaqui corpses. A search would end the adventure. There were too many men on the rancho.

Dormund said, "I thought I might talk to Don Pedro."

"Too late," said the Duke. "You'd kill him, then the Yaquis would get all of us."

Dormund said, "Then I shall find Rosa."

It was a matter of great delicacy and always the time grew shorter. They went from cabin to cabin, peering, unable to speak or be seen. The Yaquis never slept. They were excited against the morrow and its promise of wholesale killing. This very restlessness was an aid, however. The two big men moved through it and were accepted as part of it all.

They found her in the last hut on the end. She was alone, hunched over a small fire. She turned and the shadows beneath her eyes were like dark smudges. She said, "It is you," without warmth or emphasis.

Duke said hastily, "He's anxious about his niece. We got to get her out."

"I can do nothing," said Rosa. Her expressionless eyes did not leave the Swede.

"You could go to the house," said Duke. "Throw a fit. Start a riot. Anything. We got to draw them away from the jail, from those wagons."

Rosa said, "Why should I? It will mean my death."

Duke stepped to the door and looked out. "We got maybe a half hour. I'll mosey down near the jail."

He went, leaving Dormund with the woman. He heard the Swede's voice, heavy, pleading. The woman did not answer, but Duke went on and knelt near the edge of the cook house.

It was probably five minutes before Dormund came, sweating. He said feverishly, "I had to promise to take her out. . . . A hell of a thing, Bagley. She wants to see Texas. . . . Says she always wanted to see what made Texans such liars."

The Yaquis were closing in around the cabin in which the prisoners were chained. The lure of the captives was irresistible. It was getting late and in a few minutes the thing would be launched and it would be over. Duke shifted and said, "Hell, man, let her see Texas. It can't hurt anything."

"Do you think I didn't promise?" asked Dormund indignantly. "I got to get Helga out, don't I?"

The screech sounded as suddenly as a banshee's cry. It came from the house and the excited senses of the Yaquis responded immediately. Again the cry arose, and Sepulveda's voice demanded the cause, and all was bedlam in the already spooked rancho. Rosa was doing a first class job, Duke thought, bounding forward.

The door was stout, but Duke took a chance and shot the lock to pieces. There was increasing sound as people came running for the big house. Someone shouted, "The General! He is being killed!" Everyone screamed at once and the peons wailed dismally, their superstitions thoroughly aroused.

Duke stood at the door to the prison, his rifle under his right arm, a .45 revolver in his left hand, Tedito's blade between his teeth. He fully expected action, prompt and violent. Truthfully, he had little faith in survival for any of them. But burning in him was an idea and a lust for revenge. . . .

★

THE file scraped and Skim Drake began cursing at its slowness. Jan did not speak, working first at the bonds of Bo Riegel, ignoring his daughter and the foreman. Duke nodded. The Swede was turning loose the fighting men first. The sloping shoulders swayed, the big hands cleverly sought the weakest spot of the steel.

At the house it was more confused than ever. Another woman was caught in the sway of Rosa's emotional fit and added her voice to the din. Marcus Handy barked commands which were ignored. The General, his hair mussed, was waving his arms. Yaquis and peons milled about and even a vaquero or two joined the mob and were carried away. Cries of murder, arson and pillage were upon the air. Sepulveda, of course, could make nothing of it.

Duke grinned. There was a clank of chains and Bo Riegel stood in the doorway, rubbing his wrists, cool, no longer disgruntled or brooding. He said casually, "Nice row you got started. Got a gun for me?"

Duke handed him the rifle and a belt of ammunition. He said, "See those wagons? Get to 'em and break a box or two. Stay there and cover us if we get the others loose."

Riegel said, "I won't need the rifle, then. I know what's in the wagons. Jan's been crossing me a long while, running guns to Sepulveda. They stole my Herefords. Made me madder'n hell. I played I didn't know what was up, but it sure burned me. Thought you were a gov'ment man, at first. Then I decided you were a crook like the rest, on your own hook."

Duke nodded and said calmly, "That's when you hit the nail on the head, Bo. Go and take a gun for yourself!"

Riegel hobbled off, lame from being tied so long. He staggered to the covered

wagon nearest the jail, untied an end of the canvas, calmly climbed within.

Skim Drake shuffled up next. He said, "God knows why I'm in this."

Duke said, "Make for the second wagon. Hold it until we get there."

Dormund came, carrying the girl. Her legs were asleep, she said. Duke watched Skim Drake. The bow-legged lean man was making bad progress. He stopped to rub a muscle, leaning against the cook shack which had proved such a good way-station for the Duke.

Sepulveda, at the house, took advantage of a slight lull in the noise and shouted so that all could hear, "You fools, this is nothing but an hysterical woman! What of your prisoners? What of the arms for revolution? Who guards them?"

"Yaas," murmured the Duke. "Who indeed? Mebbe you better get goin', sleepy legs or no legs, Dormund. Pronto!"

The Swede staggered out, still carrying the big husky girl. He ran awkwardly, and Skim Drake was going on again. Rosa suddenly came screaming from the house, distracting the band of Yaquis and others who were heading for the prisoners.

She espied Dormund and her open mouth froze at sight of his burden. In that second she seemed to sense the whole thing, to know that the Swede was carrying his daughter, that Helga could not possibly be a niece.

Rosa screamed, pointing dramatically, "The woman! She escapes! Get her!"

Duke's gun came up. This was a reluctant Duke, holding his fire. Someone threw a knife and it narrowly missed Dormund's head. Duke fired once, twice. Two men paid tribute to his aim.

But of course they swung upon him, then. He ducked within the log house, thankful for the stoutness of the construction. Bullets stung into wood. A fearful Yaqui cry rent the heavens.

The Duke fired again and again. He emptied his hot-barreled gun. He reloaded with hands which were steady and swifter than light. He could hear Sepulveda, Marcus, the frantic General, who thought the Federals had attacked in force and was ordering retreat. He caught a glimpse of Feliz Gonzales, armed to the teeth, going into the crowd.

Gonzales could get them under control, Duke knew. He was one of them and they would listen to him or to Sepulveda, and to no one else.

He got the .45 reloaded. He leaned carefully out of the door. Shots plunked around and about him, carried away his sombrero. His thin hair, roached back in a pompadour, raised slightly to the breeze. It was a very pleasant night, he thought, seeking Gonzales among the crowd which still had no head nor tail.

He found the lean man. He held the right-hand gun steady, fired the left at a Yaqui who suddenly saw him and began charging the cabin with blazing carbine. The Yaqui went down. Duke's split vision gave him a sight of Gonzales. He fired off-hand.

Gonzales went floundering among the men he sought to rally. They fell away from him and he spun and died upon his feet, falling like an axed tree, full length upon the ground. It was dramatic enough to make them all stop and stare.

Guns began to drum from the wagon. The Yaquis who had recovered their wits sufficiently to pursue Dormund and the girl, stumbled in their tracks and died facing forward. Bo Riegel jumped the repeater until it was emptied, then picked up another gun and began firing it. Duke nodded. The young rancher had taken time to get fully loaded before he started the ruckus from that direction.

Sepulveda was not in sight, but his voice was strong, crying, "Charge the wagons! Do not let them blow up our arms! Charge them!"

The brave Yaquis were doing just that. Skim Drake reached the second wagon and climbed in. There was continuous gunfire now. Jan Dormund handed the girl up and Bo dumped her into the box of the vehicle. A bullet struck Dormund so that Duke could hear the big Swede grunt, but he got a foot on the hub and Bo helped him up.

Duke sighed with relief. He holstered the revolver. All attention was being given to the fugitives in the wagons now. The rifles brought over the Border were rattling in the hands of Skim and Bo and Dormund—men who knew how to use them.

Duke picked up the rifle Bo had not taken, grateful now. Sepulveda and Mar-

cus and the General were in the house, out of sight and range, but Sepulveda was getting order out of the chaos. The Yaquis would listen to him.

Duke aimed at the windows. The rifle spoke. Glass shattered and for a moment the voice of command was stilled. Duke chuckled at the thought of the trio within seeking shelter. He emptied the magazine and saw the lights go out in the big hacienda.

He stepped quickly within the cabin and was silent, dropping shells into the gun. It was deserted to the west of the jail and all attention was still upon the wagons. Duke waited until he was quite sure, and then walked calmly out. He was almost struck by a stray bullet from Bo's quick-shooting weapon, but he managed to gain the rear of the house.

Rosa was in the kitchen, and now she was sobbing, her apron thrown over her head. Duke tiptoed past her. He gained the hall and saw that the firelight alone illuminated the big room. Sepulveda was kneeling close to a window, trying to make himself heard without making himself a target. Marcus Handy crouched in a corner, a rifle in his hands, white terror around his lips. The doughty General lay flat on the floor and groaned, "*Federalistas!* Before we could strike one blow for Liberty, they come!"

"Shut up, you big fool!" growled Sepulveda. "If only I could get the Yaquis to hold back! They die like brave animals, charging again and again. I cannot stop them!"

Marcus said, "Go outside and talk to 'em."

Duke leaned in the doorway, his rifle under his arm. He said, "Yaas, indeed, my big brave one! Go out and tell 'em!"

Marcus started to bring the rifle around, then dropped it, raising his hands. He swore softly, "I knew we should have killed this one!"

Sepulveda turned, still kneeling, his brown face tight. The General went panicky and tried to draw a big revolver. Duke shot him through the head without raising the rifle or moving from his hip-shot position in the doorway.

Sepulveda muttered, "He was never any good. . . . What do you want, Fat Crook?"

"Money," grinned Duke. "Yaas, indeed. Quite a lot of money. And those two wagons. And you, too, of course. Nice company."

"You'll die!" said Sepulveda earnestly. "Even if you kill me, the Yaquis will get you. In this country, you cannot escape them."

"That," said the Duke, "is why you are so necessary to our welfare."

"This can be arbitrated, señor," said Sepulveda.

Outside, the gunfire increased. Yaquis screamed and died. Again and again they charged the wagons, as Sepulveda had told them. The defenders sat tight and killed them like flies.

Duke said, "Money talks. Get it up."

Sepulveda moved slowly going to a mahogany chest. He lifted bags of gold, clinked them. He put them in the exact center of the floor. A groan escaped Marcus. Sepulveda smiled thinly, and said, "My friend is over-greedy. Take this and go, señor. Leave these others to me. Now that the General is dead I would lead the Revolution in person."

Duke said, "Wa'all, wa'all! And I bet you could use a man to replace the General! A big, smart man."

"Like you?" smiled Sepulveda.

Handy cried, "No! He's a sharper. He'll sell out!"

Duke ignored the little man. He said, "Like me, mebbe."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Gunsmoke Jackpot

THE Duke stood in the doorway and juggled little red balls in his left hand while the right held the rifle. Marcus Handy's eyes were fascinated, watching. Sepulveda, near the window, was calling his Yaqui lieutenants by name, trying to get them to cease hostilities. Behind Duke there was a noise.

He shifted, covering the hall and the big room with his vision, but it was only Rosa. She was calm again. She said in a low tone, "I was spiteful. I would make amends. What if he does have a daughter?"

Duke spoke from the corner of his mouth, whispering, "Get horses to the

wagons. Hitch them when the firing stops. Tell the Swede man to be ready to drive."

"You cannot get out," she said. "The Yaquis will come from the hills."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. But we can make a hell of a fight. I got the jackpot—all I must do is to hold onto it."

She said, "I go."

Marcus was sitting very still and he was quite pale. Outside the firing lessened. Sepulveda called above the remaining noise. A silence fell abruptly as the Yaquis took to shelter.

Sepulveda said, "I am ready, señor. It is understood—your friends go free. We remain with you until they are across the Border. You return with us, in consideration of the gold, and aid us in the Revolution."

"He'll wriggle out!" said Marcus. "At the Border he'll get away with the gold."

Duke said, "You can die right here. Like the General."

Sepulveda nodded.

He turned and addressed the Yaquis. He told them to withdraw, that he had parleyed with the gringos and that there were big things ahead; that the straight-shooting Yankees would join them and help the Cause. Yells greeted him.

He turned and said, "Do we go at once, please? This is urgent. The General meant nothing to the Yaquis, but the peons believe in him. We must act quickly to hold them together."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. Let's go."

Handy was reluctant, but he came along. The three stepped onto the porch and Duke bellowed. "Dormund! I got 'em in the side pocket. Are you ready?"

"Almost!" replied the Swede. "I got to take this damn' woman along."

"Come on then!" said Duke. He prodded Marcus with the rifle muzzle. The little man fell down the steps. Sepulveda tried to leap aside, but Duke grabbed him by the arm. The wagons came up. Duke whistled and Petey came loping.

"Not the munition wagons!" said Sepulveda. "That was not in the agreement!"

"There was no agreement, my fine-feathered double-crosser," said Duke harshly. "It was your idea to leave the munitions here and have your Yaquis take you away from us. Hop onto that wagon or get ventilated."

He put Marcus in the first wagon with Bo Riegel and the girl and Dormund and Rosa. He climbed into the second with Skim Drake.

Skim Drake was whipping the team, saying, "Dormund was in it with them, all right. Bo and me stumbled onto Yaqui rustlers and got taken. They already had grabbed the gal. Sepulveda played along with Jan until he had all the guns he thought he needed. Then he decided to get hunk for some old feud they got."

"Yaas, indeed," said the Duke. "Figgered that out for myself, finally." He hefted the bags of gold. They were heavy enough. He stowed them between his knees and wondered when the Yaquis would attack. They were riding in traveling fortresses—unless a bullet should crash an ammunition case in exactly the right manner, in which case they were riding death wagons. Jan Dormund headed the wagons north and still cursed his erstwhile companions in crime.

They had almost made the canyon where the cattle were herded when the storm broke. From the hills they came, riding through the gray dawn like fiends. They bore repeating rifles and they fired volleys, like trained soldiers.

They were the Yaquis crack cavalry troop and they would pay no attention to Sepulveda nor anyone else, Duke knew. Someone from the rancho must have carried the news of Sepulveda's departure, and the hill men believed their leader was treacherous, absconding with the wagons of guns.

Duke said, "Mebbe we made a mistake, taking these wagons, at that. But I couldn't see any other way as safe. . . ." He threw up his rifle and killed one of the leaders of the Indians. Drake's long whip cracked and the horses ran as though the devil was after them.

He clambered over the boxes mumbling unhappily. At the tailgate Petey loped along, somewhat apprehensively as shots began to drop near. The Yaquis were closing in. Up front, the fire was heavy, but Skim couldn't handle a rifle and the reins at the same time.

Duke pressed the trigger a few times and the road behind cleared of pursuers.

Then he was coaxing Petey closer to the wagon.

PETEY understood, but it was not an easy task for a big man like the Duke. He had to throw himself down to the road. Then he caught the horn and leaped, scrambling awkwardly. He lost the rifle, which annoyed him. He got his feet in the stirrups and a shot went through his hair and he remembered that he had also lost his hat. He had to think hard of the gold in the bags beneath Skim Drake's feet. . . .

Petey wanted to run, and it was a good idea to check the lead wagon. Duke pulled up. Sepulveda was on the seat with a sad expression, but Marcus was hiding in the rear. Helga was loading guns and Jan Dormund was bleeding through a rough bandage, but managing the team. Bo Riegel was throwing lead at scampering Yaquis.

Sepulveda yelled, "You're a fool, Bagley! I can't stop these Indians."

Dormund shoved the ranchero back into the wagon with a sweep of his heavy arm. He growled, "Watch 'em Helga."

Duke decided that the front wagon was under control. He went back and managed to get a couple of revolver shots where it would scatter a crowd of would-be attackers. Still, there was too much lead flying around.

Petey was restless, still wanting to run clear out of it. Petey could do it, too, clear to the Border. Again the Duke had a chance to clear out. He could even get the bags from Skim at the point of his gun. It would be very profitable.

Four Yaquis, bolder and smarter than the others, appeared in the road ahead, where their swifter ponies had easily carried them.

The off horse swayed in his stride. The near one stumbled to his knees. The wagon ran up upon the struggling, wounded animals. Skim sawed on his reins, but the horses only bolted for the woods which lined the uneven roadbed. The rear wagon went sideways with a sickening lurch. Then slowly it tumbled over. Wild yells from the Yaquis, and they were riding in for the kill.

The Duke met them. He chose his targets, blocking the road, a big fat scoundrel on a big black horse. He roared defiance.

He snapped upon an empty chamber in the .45 and chucked it aside, drawing Tedito's knife from his boot. Bullets cut his clothing, nicked a lock of his hair. Yet he was untouched, and the dead piled up before him and then Skim Drake, bloody and staggering, came from the wagon with a gun in each fist.

Duke dropped back, reloading. Skim crouched like a panther about to spring and there were Yaquis all around. They seemed to blast at the lean, brave foreman all together, and he curled as the lead crashed into him and he was down, still cursing them; a brave, defiant man.

Duke wept to see it, and brought up his guns. From behind came more shots as someone recovered from the wreck of lead wagon. The Yaquis died, but still came on. Duke leaned against the pommel and with his legs urged Petey sideways. He did not know whether or not he was hit, so swift was the action, but he knew what he wanted to do. He emptied the gun and took the poniard from his mouth. He shouted, "At 'em, Petey, you four-legged catamount!"

It was pure battle, with all the risks forgotten and all dream of gain gone glimmering. He saw the dark, cruel faces of the great warriors and plunged among them, stabbing and slashing and striking with his clubbed, empty, long-barrelled gun. They gave, reeling under his charge. He heard Dormund whoop a challenge and saw the Swede limping, afoot, carrying two rifles while Bo Riegel crawled on his hands and knees, firing as fast as he could pull a trigger and draw a bolt.

Then there were no Yaquis. It was sudden and complete. They were running, or they were dead. The sudden impact of the silence stunned them, so that they stood in the stark morning light upon the blood-soaked road and stared at each other.

From behind them came a sharp command, "Drop your guns, señores. You are caught!"

Duke stared, sitting the big horse. Don Pedro Sepulveda, unhurt, and a grinning Marcus Handy were facing them, laden with weapons. Helga, stunned by the accident, was a shield lying between them.

Already Dormund and Riegel were wearily raising their hands. Duke said numbly, "How long is this goin' on? Those hombres are plumb pizen to me!"

He saw the two bags of gold, resting on a hummock of grass, unbroken, beautiful as two speckled pups in the eyes of the Duke. He saw Sepulveda's triumph, shining like a beacon from his eyes. And then he knew that the Don would take no more chances, that there was murder in him, right now, to settle all things between them once and for all.

He threw himself from Petey's back. He shouted, "Down!" Dormund and Riegel had sense enough to throw themselves sideways. The weapons spoke in the hands of Handy and Don Pedro. A hunk of lead tore Riegel's arm, swinging it useless at his side. Another furrowed its way through Dormund's already wounded side.

The girl moaned and moved. Her sturdy arm went out. She grasped Handy's ankle and jerked with all her remaining strength. The man tumbled backward discharging his rifle at the skies.

A shapeless bundle of humanity flung itself from the wreck of the wagon. It bore a clubbed rifle from the broken cases. The butt swung and as Duke dived forward he heard the satisfying clunk as Rosa slapped the weapon against the skull of Don Pedro Sepulveda.

Then Duke had Marcus by the throat and was lifting him. Around and around he spun, like a Celtic hammerthrower he had once seen in St. Louis. He got up speed, he let go. Marcus took off in a satisfying flight. He went over once, and crashed. His head seemed to penetrate the trunk of a giant, spreading cactus plant. He stuck there and did not move, nor would he ever move again, thought the Duke with great inner satisfaction.

They surveyed each other. The wagons were wrecked, the horses dead or soon to die mercifully under the gun. Dormund was bleeding like a stuck pig. Helga was trying to bandage Bo Riegel's arm. Only Rosa, relapsed into her habitual calm, and Duke, shaking a little with reaction, were unharmed. Even Petey looked serious and subdued. . . .

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. A victory, and nothing won. The Yaquis may return. Yaas!"

Dormund groaned, "We'll have to stay here and trust to luck."

Rosa stoically tore up a none too clean petticoat; of course she wore many. She said, "I think not, Swede man. Listen!"

There was the sound of hoofs to the north, coming swiftly. Duke said, "Already?" grabbing his guns.

A faint musical note sounded. It was a bugle call!

Duke said, "The Federals!"

"When I repented," Rosa said complacently, "I send my cousin, Santina. The people do not want this revolution, no? Better the Federals should come to the ranchero and finish up."

"We lose the guns," said Dormund unhappily. "We'll be arrested, too."

"Yaas," said the Duke. He walked slowly and thoughtfully to where the bags of gold lay. "They'll take this, too, unless . . ." He stooped down and picked them up. He opened his saddle bags. He said, "It's been a right fine time, people." He mounted Petey, who still wanted to run, and nodded. "I wouldn't choose this way. I'll be dependin' on you people not to mention you saw me hereabouts. Nobody else knows I was here, except those two dead gents. Yaas, indeed. I'll be ridin'."

"You'll get killed, you idiot!" Dormund bawled.

Duke sighed. "Might be, pardner, might be! Yaas. However—I got this jackpot. Seems like I won it fair and square. Reckon I oughta play out my cards!"

He slapped his heels into the willing Petey. They hit the hill and climbed, keeping to the cover of the scrub growth of trees. They went directly north, parallelling the road upon which the Federalista troops came racing.

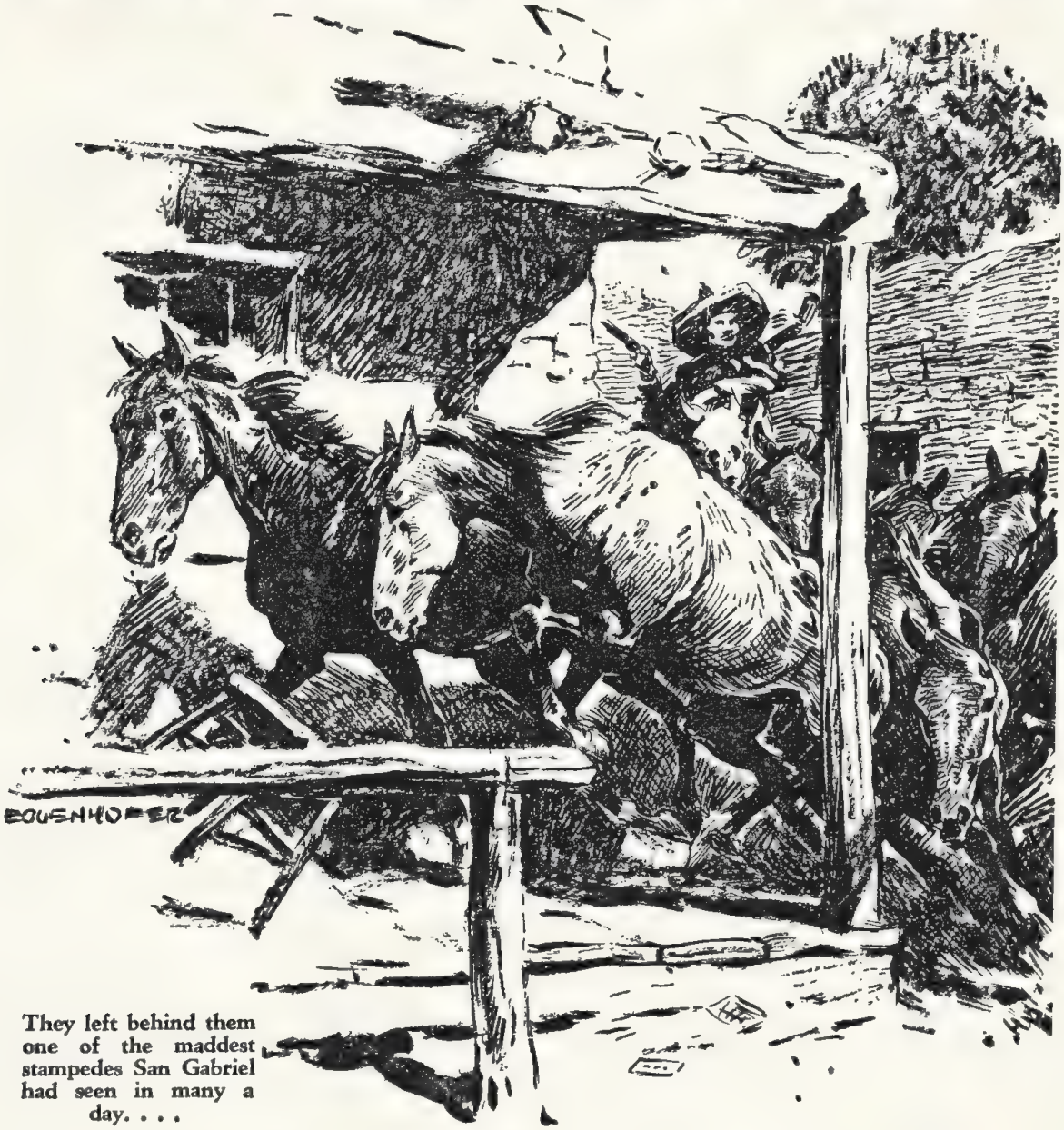
Dormund muttered, "I'll bet he makes it, at that. He is a very tough fellow!"

Rosa said soulfully, "You tough, too. Shoot you, stab you. Swede man always lives!"

Dormund relaxed. He was caught, all right. He stared after Duke enviously. It must be wonderful to take your profits and ride away, he thought. . . .

THE END

LAWLESS LAW HITS



They left behind them one of the maddest stampedes San Gabriel had seen in many a day. . . .

Pancho, troubadoring pardner of the wild Red Cliff Kid, didn't mind busting his saddle-mate out of jail, but when he found that the Kid actually never had seen the eighty-thousand dollars he'd been accused of stealing . . . that was the time the little Mex started to sing a new and deadly song, to the staccato tune of snarling six-shooters!

CHAPTER ONE

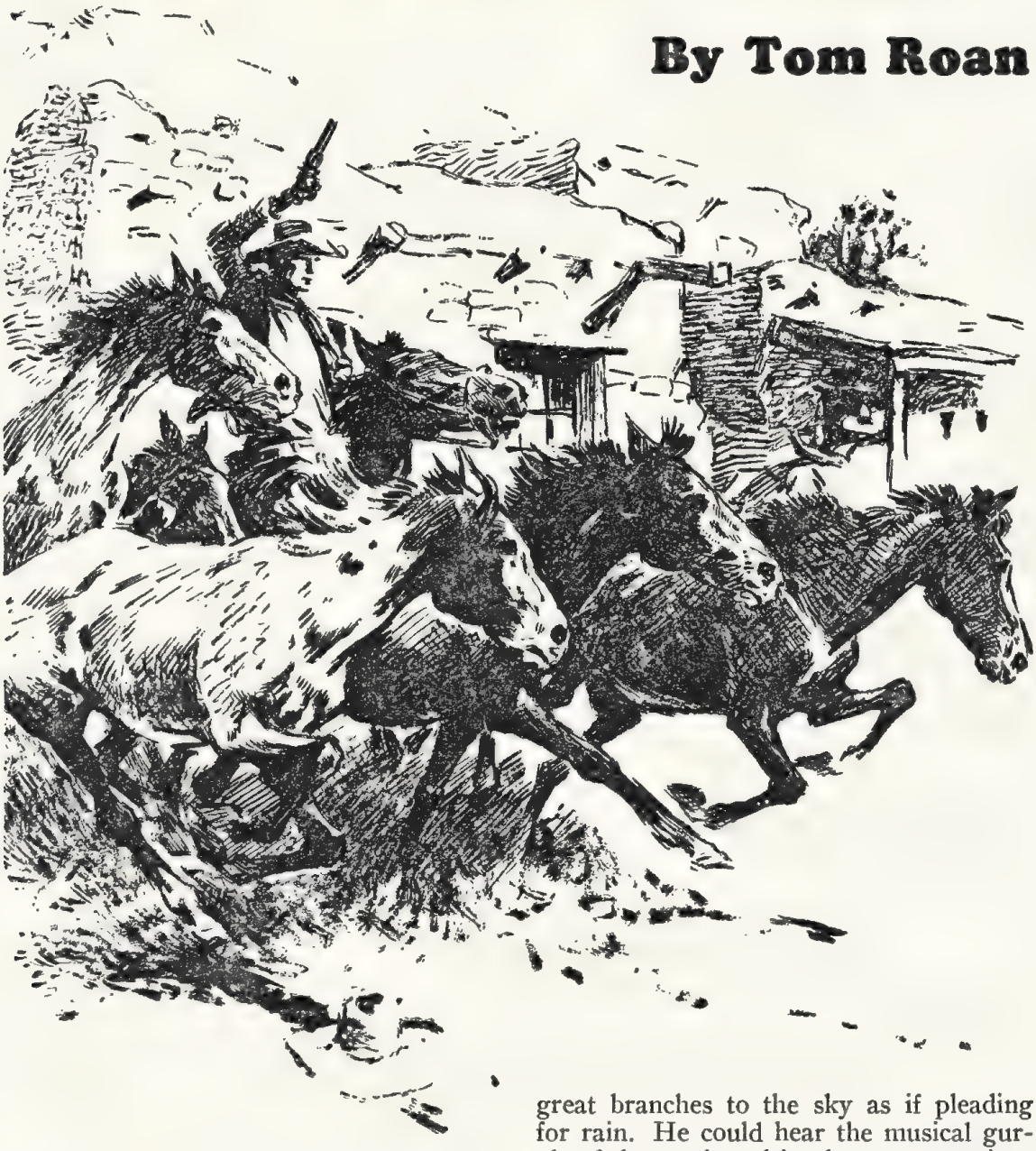
When San Gabriel Ran Wild

HE LAY on his back in the late-afternoon shade of the watertank at the north end of San Gabriel's broad main street—a bare-footed and near-ragged splinter of a man with lizard-tailed little mustaches. He was lazily strumming a brand-new guitar with enough bright-colored ribbons on it to hang the one-eyed gray burro with his

SAN GABRIEL

Gripping Novel of the Border

By Tom Roan



enormous ears that stood half asleep in the cool shadows behind him.

Señor San Francisco Don Juan Jesucristo—plain Pancho for short—had all the outward look of a man entirely at peace with the world. The air was still, just the way he liked it, as the hot Arizona sun slow-dropped beyond the wild wall of waterless mountains in the west. The long street below was peaceful, shadow-pooled by giant old pepper trees lifting great branches to the sky as if pleading for rain. He could hear the musical gurgle of the creek and its drowsy song singing among the willows below the drop-off of the slope to his right.

In addition to all that he had other things. His stomach was full of goat's milk and coffee, tortillas and frijoles that had been as red as good blood with chili pods and swimming in a rich bacon soup. It all had been fed to him by the dainty hands of the honey-voiced Panchita, the dark-eyed wife of Don Augusto Ramon, fat, mustached banker whose house and

fine gardens stood above the creek on the west side of the town.

He should have been happy, and had been until a couple of hours ago. Now each time he opened his mouth to sing, the words choked in his throat and the slow tears ran down his cheeks, making his heart feel like a great lump of cold stone in his chest.

Tomorrow was Friday, and Friday was going to be a very bad day. When the clocks in San Gabriel struck eleven a most terrible thing would be done in the old gray stone and adobe building straight down the street beyond the creek. There, inside those high and grim walls his good friend, the Red Cliff Kid, would die with a strong rope around his neck and his feet swinging and kicking on the empty air!

"Madre de Dios!" he growled, suddenly laying the guitar aside. "Thees must not be, oh, no! The biggest of fools would know the Señor Keed would never rob the bank—not without little Pancho along. Eh, no, Judas, you one-eyed good-for-nothing, neither horse nor mule?"

Judas flicked an ear at him, regarding him steadily with his good left eye for a moment, and promptly dozed again. There was no appreciation of right or wrong in the brain of a jackass. One never knew when Judas would kick or bite. It had been two weeks to a day since he had seen Black Ball, the Kid's fine horse, and not a care did Judas show.

Pancho took a folded newspaper out of his bosom and carefully studied the picture on the front page again. There could be no mistake about it. He had picked up the paper off a stone table as he was leaving the Don Ramon's flower-draped patio where he had whiled away all the morning and the most of the afternoon.

It was all there, and the paper said it. Panchita had sworn that it was true. The Kid was a bad man. He had ridden into town just eleven days ago, he had robbed the bank of eighty thousand whole dollars, and had killed the cashier, to boot. A posse had found him asleep in the hills at dawn four days later, and quick justice had demanded that his neck be broken.

"The money is still missing," Panchita had explained. "He will confide to no one where to find it, and the don is very worried. If he does not tell where the money is before they hang him, then, my wandering man with the guitar, the bank will have to make the people suffer a terrible loss—and the don will be so very sorry."

Pancho had not told her the Red Cliff Kid was his friend. A man with a brain or two in his skull did not reveal all he knew to a woman, for one could never tell which way the empty winds of their pretty heads might blow.

He sat now watching and waiting while the sun died and the shadows pooled below. When it was dark enough he arose and strolled down the hill with Judas at his heels like a faithful dog. The guitar had a strong song of life, now that he knew what he was going to do, and he sent a song floating through the cool night air.

It was a rousing song, full of gusto, the song of the great cock, the rooster that flew all over Mexico, whipping ugly-necked condors by two or the dozen, and at last sailed away to roost on the rim of a redhot volcano with sixteen pretty bald-head eagles to wife.

They cheered him and threw pennies in his huge sombrero in front of the *cantinas* down the street, and one swell—a little tipsy and wanting to show off to a bright-eyed girl clutching his arm—tossed a shiny new silver peso at his bare feet.

The business would not be easy without a gun when it came to taking a friend out of a strongly guarded jail. He had sold his six-hooter only the day before he had chanced to wander into Panchita Ramon's fine courtyard with its high walls all around. There, she had heard his playing and singing just beyond the wall, and in a moment's whim had ordered an old gardener to let him in. But gun or no gun this thing had to be done, and one whose determination was never lax might accomplish something where others would be sure to fail.

By a little at a time he worked himself toward the footbridge and the dark grove of trees beyond the creek. On the way he picked up a stone as large as his fists and dropped it inside the ragged bosom of his shirt.

Women were often put in jail for this

and that, and it was the poor lover who would not come and serenade the sweet apple of his eye. Under the east wall and the glimmering light of the stars he stopped, and the song he now sung—making it up as he sang—to the whipping of the strings was one that could not help but tell the Red Cliff Kid that his good friend was up and about:

"Señor San Francisco!
Don Juan Jesucristo!
Under the window Pancho sings
And good tidings he brings . . ."

It was a Mexican letting everything he had into it, but no answer came back to him, no bit of plaster dropped; no whisper or a low and guarded whistle in the night. Perhaps, after all, they had hanged the Señor Keed much sooner than Panchita had said! The man who answered him was a tall fellow, broad-shouldered, thick-chested, and wearing two big six-shooters at his hips and a star on his vest that glittered like an evil eye in the starshine.

"But," wailed Pancho, "a gentleman gave me a *peso* to play for his sweetheart in jail, and I swear to you my word and the Pope's is the same. I was never known to lie!"

"Yo'll get the hell outa here," growled the officer, "or I'll smash yore face into a jelly. In the mornin' we're goin' to have a hangin', an' we ain't wantin' nobody foolin' around."

"But the dollar, señor!" Pancho held it up between his finger and thumb. "The gentleman will be sure to want it back—"

"An' let's see 'im get it!" The officer's hand jerked forward and grabbed the dollar. "I can use this!"

"Si, si, señor, but look!" Pancho pointed with his left hand to the trees behind the man. "The gentleman is waiting—"

"Where?" The officer wheeled. His back was to Pancho for a moment, and a moment was enough. The heavy stone came out of the ragged bosom. Pancho smashed it down on the back of the man's head, dropping him flat on his face with no more than a startled grunt.

ONE did not waste time here unless he wished to lose his neck, and he was as quick as a monkey about the rest of it. Swinging the guitar behind him, he went to work on his victim. In moments he was trussed up, bound and gagged and disarmed. And once more the silver peso changed hands. With all that done he simply tossed him like a bound billy-goat into the weeds and bushes, and was ready for other things that were soon bound to happen.

He strolled quietly back to the corner of the jail and along the wall to the office in the front center of it. A glance through the window showed him three burly guards, a Mexican, a big red-head, and a low-browed black-head playing poker on the broad old oak desk in the center of the room. They must have thought it was the fourth player of their game returning, for they were too intent on a big bet that had just been made to glance up when he opened the door and slid inside. He had a cocked .45 in either hand and a most patronizing little smile on his face.

"Señores," he intoned, "eet ees so sorry I am to deesturb what you call heem the leetle game, eh, no?"

The red-head was facing the door. He lifted his head with a start and jerked half-way to his feet, kicking his chair against the wall with a crash, his hands rising, a wild look in his wide and popping eyes. "Look—what's here!"

"Heem?" The big Mexican spoke as he came to his feet with the third man, their hands lifting instinctively, faces bloodless with sudden alarm. "Weeth wan hand I could hold heem and skin heem weeth the other—"

"Sí, sí, señor," grinned Pancho, comcoming back at him in Spanish, "but what would I be doing all the while? A pull of my finger and a hóle will fly in your belly to let some of the fat run out of you. Face the wall and do not keep me waiting a second longer than is necessary. At times I am a most impatient man, *hombre,* and stand for no delay."

"Are—are we goin' to be taken in by a wart like that?" The red-head was so mad he was beginning to whimper and looked on the verge of sudden tears. "There are three of us here an' if we let that damned bare-footed runt—"

"Señor," cut in Pancho, half in English and half in Spanish, "the good gon ees not a theeng to care whether the feet are bare or shod with the finest of leather.

Oh, no, a pull of the treeger—and *poof!* Poor Pancho can almost hear your wife and your mother crying as they look in the coffin at your dead face. A leetle higher weth the hands. *Madre de Dios,* how my finger already begins to get what you call heem the itch. Up higher!"

He was just as fast here as he had been outside, knowing that everything hinged on time. In a matter of less than thirty seconds he had all their weapons and they were locked together with handcuffs taken from the wall, then he stepped back to the desk and lowered the light with fingers that were as steady as iron.

"You will now unlock the big strong door," he ordered, still smiling his lazy smile and speaking mostly to the Mexican guard.

"And then, my friends, go quietly inside. You will take me first to the cell of the Señor Red Cleeff Keed and unlock his door so he may come out. You are not to be harmed, I swear—eef you do all heem I say. *Move!*"

The Mexican unlocked the door, and they went down the corridor, cursing in whispers. Prisoners at either side were on their feet like startled animals in cages, staring through their steel doors. Pancho's unwilling but helpless prisoners led him straight on to the death cell. Through the bars he saw the Kid, longer and leaner than ever before, the boyish look gone from his brown-bearded and unwashed face and his eyes like two burning coals staring at the unbelievable scene in front of him.

"Pancho!" he hissed. *"Por Dios,* can it be you?"

"Sí, sí, Señor Keed!" Pancho grinned all over his face. "In wan moment you weel be as free as the bird on weeng and then we weel be flying toward the Border. Open the door, man of my race!"

"Gawd!" groaned the red-headed guard. "I'll swing on his feet when they hang 'im for this! Only—only, we just can't let him get away with it! Hellfire, ever'body'll laugh us out of town an' we'll never live this disgrace down!"

"Sí, sí, señor," agreed the big Mexican, fitting a key in the door, "but eet weel beat dying, eh, no? The leetle wan weel shoot, and I see eet en hees eye. Come, Señor Keed, eet seems you have a strong friend, although, I, Pedro Santa Anna, could crush heem like a louse if he did not have the beeg gons!"

"Let us out, too!" Everybody was whispering and begging when the Red Cliff Kid was out of his cell and the three officers herded into it. "Give us a chance to beat it with you."

"On one condition!" answered the Kid, grabbing two well-filled cartridge belts and a pair of six-shooters from Pancho's shoulder. "We'll open one cell and give you the keys. I have a horse to get out of the corrals and the stables in back. Release everybody and keep these monkeys quiet until we have a five-minute start. Is that a deal?"

"It's a deal!" exclaimed a gray-bearded old sinner in a cell to his right. "Drop me a gun-belt off that fella's shoulder, an' I'll shoot the first badge-totin' monk in that cell who lets a bleat out of 'im. I'm old Rube Tolbert, and I won't forget this, pard, an' somehow, or somewhere we'll meet agin an' I'll pay yuh back. I allus pay my debts."

Pancho tossed him a belt and a six-shooter, and they were streaking it a moment later, leaving everything to the old man and the ones he was releasing from their cells. They headed out the front way where Judas was waiting, and then along the dark west wall to the stables. In four minutes Black Ball had been found and saddled, and they were mounted and riding away when the first roar of a gun sounded behind and hell broke loose in the jail.

"Help! Help!" bellowed a voice that undoubtedly belonged to the big redhead. "The jail! *The jail! Help! Come quick!"*

It was like letting go a string of suddenly exploding firecrackers in the deep silence of a lonely graveyard. Men were racing down the street in a moment. Other fleeing figures were gliding in streams out of the jail and heading like so many stampeding goats for the rocks and trees.

It seemed no time at all before somebody was ringing the ancient Spanish bell in the cupola above the office of the jail, and the far-tolling notes were letting the world know that a terrible thing had come to shatter the smug peace and dignity of San Gabriel.

CHAPTER TWO

Pancho's Gunsmoke Stampede

SCREENED by the low limbs of the trees, Pancho headed in a half-circle toward the creek to hug the west side of the town. "To the Border I said we were going, but neither Pancho nor you could be such a beeg fool."

Some of the fleeing prisoners back there had seized weapons and boxes of cartridges from the gun-lockers on the wall as they dashed through the office of the jail. A sudden burst of shots now filled the night, the stabbing flames of light from both rifles and six-shooters that warned the crowd pouring across the footbridge to keep back.

Pancho kept to the cool darkness of the creek, leading the way quietly. They came up under the rocky bank behind the high walls of Don Augusto Ramon's fine house. Eighty yards beyond the place he swung up, leading the way to a tall gate that was like an iron-bound door set in an old wall more than a yard thick. In a few seconds he had worked the secret of the ancient wooden lock and the door was open. Quietly then he led the way inside where the heavy perfume of both living and dead flowers struck them.

"The barn once used by the *padres* is there," he whispered in Spanish, pointing through a tangle of gloom to the left as he closed the door and carefully saw that it was locked again. "We will put Judas and the good horse out of sight, and then we will sit quietly and listen while the rest may run and get caught or shot."

"But—but what's this place?" hissed the Kid, catching him by the arm. "The whole town will be searched—"

"Only they will not search here, señor," grinned Pancho. "Thees ees an old, old church set up by the Spanish when they first came. It is also a graveyard where only the bones of the dead are lying. *Dios!* Leesten to theem outside. Ees eet not wan hell of a noise they make!"

"They'll lynch us if they catch us!"

"But first, they must catch us, señor!"

He led the way on inside the stables and found a big stall in the darkness where Judas and Black Ball could be safely hidden for the time, and then moved on to a corner to ease down on his heels. By this time the noise outside was like a steadily rising panic flooding San Gabriel from end to end. They heard horsemen charging up the creek beyond the wall, heard another wild burst of shooting in the distance and men yelling.

"It seems to get worse instead of better," whispered the Kid after they had listened to the noise coming from all directions. "They seem to be starting a general search of every house and yard, and I was afraid of that."

"*Si, si,* and I knew it would come," nodded Pancho. "But I tell you again, señor, I am not afraid of this place. Who would dare search the church and go plodding about among the graves? Surely the spirits of the ancients would be up and after them."

The noise was like something that would never end. A woman's fierce scream came to them, rising on the dull report of a heavy Colt. The five or six women the Kid knew were in jail had evidently been freed along with the rest of the prisoners. Panic-stricken fools hunting them had run one of them down and opened fire.

Another woman's voice came to them a few minutes later, one low and guarded, almost right at hand. They had moved closer to the east doorway of the run-down stables and were standing where the starlight fell upon them like a blade cutting through the trees.

"I tell you, Pasquale, I must hurry!" whispered the voice in Spanish. "The whole town is an an uproar. They may come to my house. Who knows what fools will do when they get started?"

"But you can always find an excuse to run away!" retorted another voice with ill-concealed bitterness. "Who would dare search the grounds of Don Ramon even if he is out of the house? He would have them hanged by their thumbs and their tongues cut out of their heads. I tell you, my little one, you but seek the excuse."

"*Panchita!*" whispered Pancho, breathing the word in the Kid's ear. "She is as galling as a sharp nail in an old boot. The dog with her now is Pasquale Robles, first cousin of the don, and what do you think of that? She should have her pretty nose cut off and her ears to boot!"

"Look!" The woman had come out of

a pool of shadows, a pretty little thing even with the light behind her. Now she was pointing straight at the foolish Pancho, standing there in the starshine and glaring at her. "Outside they are saying it was a bare-footed clown with a guitar who let the bad one and all the others out of the jail, and who was the clown with the guitar but that man standing there?"

"Si, si!" snarled Robles, throwing himself back into the deeper shadows like a startled buck suddenly dashing for cover. "The bad one is with him also! Flee for your life, Panchita!"

"Wait, woman!" Pancho started to go forward, his big hat in his hand and ready to plead for mercy. "You can not see us tossed like dead goats to the dogs to have the meat ripped from their bones! I tell you now—"

But Panchita did not let him finish. Like Robles, she headed on into the darkness, old briars and shrubbery clutching at her as she fled toward the walls of her own house with her voice screaming:

"Help! They are here! Behind the old church, the little one and the tall one! *Help!*"

★

PASQUALE ROBLES was yelling before they could wheel and get back into the blackness of the stables. Shots and yells not far away made it impossible to tell what he was saying, but he was dashing on toward the street, a bull tearing his way over gravestones covered with brush and vines that had been uncut for years.

It looked like the end of everything had come. A wild uproar of voices were sounding behind the stables and along the creek. As Judas and Black Ball were brought out of the stall a great pounding started sounding on a door in the rear wall of Don Ramon's house.

"They are not here, fools!" That was Panchita, safe inside her own grounds and walls again, and giving the mob a scorching with her tongue. "The top of our walls are covered with sharp spikes and broken glass. Not even a bird can light on the top of them without cutting its feet. They are in the old stables behind the old church, I tell you! Go there quickly and shoot them as they come out!"

"Por Dios!" growled Pancho. "And only today she swore she loved me! Señor, leave it to a woman like that to double-cross you every blessed time. If the don knew about this Pasquale he would cut both their throats."

He led the way again, but this time it was across a little runway and to another door-like gate in the north wall that was a close squeeze for Black Ball to get through. Any one acquainted with the stables and the grounds would have never suspected that gate was one that could be used for bringing horses in or out. It was one that had probably not been opened in years. The foliage was dense here, and before they had gone a yard Pancho was halting, lifting his hand in sudden alarm.

"Kill them!" Panchita was still screaming her head off behind them. "They are in the stables of the old church, I tell you. Kill them as they go out the back way and across the creek!"

Startled whispers came to them, some sounding only three or four rods away. Danger seemed to be lurking in every clump of shadow along the creek. Holding Black Ball and Judas by their muzzles they turned as cautiously as they could toward the street, knowing that a wild dash into the open would be the last thing that would be expected of them.

"Look!" suddenly bawled a voice toward the creek. "What the hell's that movin' there! The woman's right, boys! That's them, damn it, an' there they go out through the north wall! *Halt!*"

The Red Cliff Kid's answer to that was a licking flame of fire and the thundering roar of a shot. A yell of either surprise or pain came back to him, and Pancho fired at some one else almost at the same instant, then they were leaping to the backs of the horse and the jackass and beginning their dash for it.

It was pell-mell and hell's bells, two riders yelling like maniacs and making a desperate drive straight into the street because there was nowhere else to go right now. Mobs up and down the street yelled, then ducked and streaked for shelter as the Kid and Pancho roared lead in either direction from each hand as they shot on, heading into the mouth of a narrow alley-

way with a burst of shooting and a wild crying of excited voices following them.

Pancho was still in the lead, the new guitar riding high and safe on his back. They swept around a bend in the alleyway and saw a wider one ahead. Down that alley to the right was a big corral filled with mustangs that some enterprising trader had rounded-up in the wild horse country in the hills and was going to ship eastward for sale.

Pancho headed straight for the spot and was soon taking time to cut the stout ropes on the wide gate and swing it open. A few shots fired in the air accomplished the rest of it, and they swept on, leaving behind them one of the worst stampedes San Gabriel had seen in many a day as all those near-crazy horses poured out of the corral and started a thundering scatter in every direction the wild-eyed brutes could see to run.

"And that, señor, ees that!" He grinned broadly as he swung in to the Kid's right when they were a mile out of town to eastward and turning northward. "Eet was the wan way to geet theengs done in the way you call heem, by golly! Señor," he added in Spanish, "it was too bad. Before another hour she will be crying her eyes out."

"She came very near getting our blood, if it's the woman you're talking about." The Kid was turned to one side in his saddle, watching the lights of the town as they started up a long ridge.

"Señor, there is no explanation to a woman! That is why Pancho loves them and leaves them. But," he settled back on Judas, "the world is full of them and why bother the head about just one? I suppose we will now go into a fine business, eh, no? Perhaps we will buy a railroad many miles long, and I will let you sit in the engine to ring the bell and go like hell—"

"While you walk through the coaches taking the money!" finished the Kid. "What'll we buy it with, that eighty thousand dollars I took when I robbed the bank and killed a man?"

"Of course, señor! To be sure we will not spend all of it for just one railroad or two—"

"There's no eighty thousand dollars, Pancho," cut in the Kid, flatly. "I thought even a dumb, guitar-thumping, wife-stealing monkey like you could figure that out! I never saw Don Augusto Ramon and his damned bank until a posse rounded me up and brought me into San Gabriel with everybody crying to lynch me."

"Señor, no!" Pancho jerked Judas to a halt and caught him by the arm with a look of alarm in his eyes. "Do you mean to say we have gone to all this trouble just to save them from breaking your neck and you do not have the money? Eh, no, thees would be the keeling blow to the poor heart of Pancho!"

CHAPTER THREE

Hide-Out for the Hunted!

THEY rode on, watching the darkness and hills. The excitement of Gabriel was taking care of itself behind them. The wild horse stampede had knocked everything into a cocked hat, frustrating the charge of mounted men who would have followed hot on their heels and giving the two fleeing men almost their own good time to pick their way of escape. Now it was all cursing and yelling back there, and no one in the town knew which way to strike out to follow them.

Pancho's sudden shock had cast him into absolute silence for the next two miles, but as the first light of the rising moon started to show on the hills his spirits perked up. He ignored the Kid's frown as he swung his guitar around in front of him and started picking a whispering tune that could not have been heard a dozen rods away.

In the many months they had been together the two near-outlaws of the Border had had their ups and downs so frequently they would have been lost without them. It was not often that they were separated for long, and a woman or a dark-eyed señorita was usually the cause of that on the part of Pancho who could no more let them alone than a dog might forget his fleas. When a love stampede struck him they came as naturally as spasms of colic from green apples, and the only thing for the Kid to do was to let him run his course.

Only two weeks ago it had been a certain Dolores, the two hundred and forty pounds of supposed beauty belonging to a

one-eyed old Manuel in Silver Dot, a little mining camp forty miles to the north. The Kid had left him there with Pancho vowing that genuine love and full happiness had come to him at last and he had wandered his final weary mile of an aimless, do-nothing life.

"But she was wan beeg fool like all the rest," Pancho now explained. "She felt that I—Pancho, the great lover weeth the geetar and the song on hees lips!—would go to work in the mine, earning but one dollar every day, and she would keep poor Pancho like a puppy dog tied to her shirt-tail and old Manuel under the same roof to boot! But this, señor, is even much worse than that. They put you in jail to hang you for stealing eighty thousand dollars, and," he broke into his English again, "you do not have the money. What happened to make all the beeg meestake and where did the money go?"

"Your good friend Don Augusto Ramon swore in the courtroom that I took it, Pancho. He said I was the man who came in the back door of the bank with a gun in my hand. He said I scooped up all the money and shot the cashier. I've told you I didn't. Put away that guitar! You're getting louder and louder with it. We're not out of danger by a long shot yet. I think I hear horses somewhere ahead of us."

"But we have six-shooters now, señor." Pancho slung the guitar behind him. "Let them come!"

They rode more to the east side of the great ridge and hugged the low trees, the rocks and brush there. The hoofs the Kid had thought he had heard were unmistakable now. They were coming up the side of the ridge, and a short time later Judas and Black Ball were being held by the nose in a little cluster of piñons while three riders heading toward San Gabriel passed along the top of the ridge in a noisy canter with blades of light from the rising moon cutting through the trees and falling full upon them.

Two of the men rode almost stirrup to stirrup while the third under the floppy brim of a huge hat brought up the rear like a fat sack of grain squashed low in his saddle. The two in the lead were big men, and one of them was Don Augusto Ramon, a ponderous man whose belly seemed to ride like a bundle on his lap. The rider just beyond him wore a white mustache and was a square-shouldered, deep-chested human bull whose nickname fitted him as perfectly as his nose.

"Señor Bull Galliger!" whispered Pancho tensely as they rode on. "And the don and his fat Alfonso, the horse servant who follows him about like a dog. Where have they been, señor?"

"Who knows!" The Kid turned back to his horse when it was safe enough. "Ramon and Galliger are no men to go about with signs on their backs to tell their business."

"Maybe they do not yet know what has happened in San Gabriel!"

"I have an idea you're right." The Kid swung into his saddle. "Galliger doesn't spend much of his time around the jail. I didn't hear or see him there since before sundown, but what they don't know right now won't hurt 'em. Come on."

They headed down the slope diagonally now. A creek whispered lazily below them, and at the end of two miles, coming down the slope under the shelter of the darkness of the trees, they were on the cañon floor.

What men like Ramon and Galliger would want down here in this deep hole was a mystery. The cañon would soon end against a great wall of almost impassable cliffs in the north, but it was not long after the Kid and Pancho reached the creek they were certain something important had taken place here.

"Hoofs again, señor!" warned Pancho as he reached out with his left hand and suddenly caught the Kid by the arm in a grip strong enough to make him wince. "We had better cross the creek and ver' queek, eef we are to geet out of sight, eh, no?"

They swung across to deeper brush and again piled to the ground as if it was to be a never-ending thing. The wait was not long this time. Four galloping horsemen appeared. It was impossible to get a good look at them down here, but something was making them get out of the cañon in a hurry.

They swung up the slope like strung-out ghost riders in the night, spurring and quirting their horses until they were out of sight and the noise of the hoofs died.

Once more the way was cleared, and it remained that way. Black Ball and Judas were pushed on for another mile before the smell of smoke came to them, making the horse and Judas throw up their heads and snort.

"There's a goat-herder's place ahead," explained the Kid. "We've got to look out for it, Pancho. It might be anything but goats now. Everybody at the jail said that all these cañons are hair-triggered danger these days."

The place was in sight ahead and to the right a few minutes later. One might have passed within eighty yards of it without seeing it if it had not been for the dull glow of light from a dirt-stained window in the south end of it and the smoke rising from the roof and billowing from the ragged eaves. It was a mere hut of sun-baked mud and small logs with a couple of low sheds behind it.

The Kid pulled rein quickly. "Look at the smoke—and *listen*!"

The noise that came to them now made cold chills race down their spines. It was a long, thin cry that seemed to bubble up from tremendous misery, a sound soaring on to its highest note, holding tense and shrill, then pitching drunkenly away in a mournful whine that seemed to tell the rising moon of a great hurt and a great wrong.

"That's a dog, Pancho!" hissed the Kid. "And that dog's crying for help as sure as we're sitting here! A hell of a place for us to hole up!"

★

THE KID dismounted and moved on ahead while Pancho waited to bring up the rear. It was ever like that when danger faced them. One always stayed back, a figure slipping through the shadows with a six-shooter in his hand to prevent his friend from being caught unaware.

When the Kid was fifty yards from the hut, the dog came out to meet him. It was a whimpering little thing, short-haired and bob-tailed—a black and white dog with fox-like ears. The Kid usually got along with dogs anywhere, but this one dropped to its belly apologetically as if doubtful whether the approaching man would be friend or foe. It crawled forward, whining. The Kid dropped to a squat on his right heel and held out his hand.

"Come, Bub," he whispered. "Everything's all right."

The dog whimpered again, even bared his small, sharp teeth as a warning, but he came on. A moment later the Kid had him in his arms, and the dog reached up with his muzzle and licked his face, the one way of a little dog shivering with fear to tell a man he was going to trust him. His sore need of a friend was in his round eyes when he looked back toward the hut and whimpered again.

Six-shooter in his hand and the dog in his arms, the Kid moved on to the window and looked into the hut. He breathed a whispered oath as he stared at a table in the center of a long, low room and at a bushy-haired big Mexican of fifty who sprawled across the table, his face and hands buried in upset bottles and glasses.

The light and the smoke came from a burning mattress on a bunk beyond the man. Through the smoke, the Kid saw a second big bunk against the opposite wall. On it were two figures lying back to back. In the uncertain light he saw that they were bound and gagged. That man at the table was dead, but the people on that bunk were still alive!

He was quick about getting inside, but he had to let the dog to the ground and drive his shoulder against the door a number of times before he sent it crashing off

Tom W. Blackburn, author of many fine stories in this magazine, has a first-string novelette in the current 10 STORY WESTERN—in which you'll meet Christian Defever, a ham actor turned trigger artist. You can read "The Gunsmoke Broker" TODAY!

its fastenings. As the door fell he dropped to his hands and knees, the smoke a blinding cloud pouring out above him and the fire on the mattress now rising into a steady flame with the increased draft.

The dog headed quickly to the bunk opposite the fire. In spite of the smoke and heat he started to bark hopefully. The Kid got there a second later, and saw that it was a Mexican woman and a mere slip of a girl on the bunk. Grabbing the woman he rushed outside with her while the little dog waited with the girl. He came back in a few seconds, carrying the girl out, with the dog following. Now he could rip the gags from their mouths, and the woman spoke to him in Spanish, her voice gasping.

"Señor, the fire! Soon it will eat to the end of the bed, and that end is covered with oil!"

The Kid wheeled, almost flying back into the hut. He seized a blanket from the bunk where he had rescued the woman and the girl, and threw it on the fire. Then, working as if the devil was driving him with a red-hot pitch-fork, he rolled the mattress into a quick wad and rushed outside with it. When he dropped it, it burst now into a tall sheet of solid flame.

Pancho, seeing that there was no gunplay, had come up, leaving Black Ball and Judas tied under the trees behind him. "What a blaze, señor!"

"It was set to burn the house and the woman and girl with it!" exclaimed the Kid. "There's a dead man in there at the table."

"Sí, señor, it is my husband, Ignacio Parral." The woman answered him. Pancho was busy with his knife, cutting the ropes that bound her hands behind her. "I am Martina, and this is Carmen Bonilla, my sister's daughter. They shot my poor Ignatio from under the table when he was pouring them drinks."

"Caramba!" growled Pancho, now freeing the girl. "Tell me, does nothing but dark deeds and quick death come to this country? Easy, señorita, do not make the knife slip and cut the soft and sweet little hands. *Madre de Dios,* but you are the most beautiful thing poor Pancho has seen. In all my life I have never seen such eyes—"

"Get her loose and shut up!" ripped in the Kid, seeing a new bloom of romance coming even in this mess. "You tell them all the same tale!"

They let the mattress burn, the blaze of it now casting a high light in the trees and all the way to their tops. There was a pretty fair chance that gunmen in the distance were watching, and they would see the light and think the hut was going up in flames according to their plan.

But right from the start it was patent that Martina Parral had been terrorized half out of her wits, and was going to be reluctant to talk. She was no more than thirty, now that one could see her in the bright blaze without the big rag around her face and mouth, and she was light-skinned, tall and good looking, the right kind for Pancho to go loco about.

The girl was no more than sixteen, almost frighteningly pretty in a wild way. She was dark-skinned, eyes two shining black buttons that seemed to have a fierce fire burning in their depths. Where the woman was afraid, little Carmen Bonilla was not. There was a trace of Indian blood in that child's veins, and the look in her eyes would never know fear of either heaven or hell. Even Pancho, never to be daunted in love by gunpowder or cold steel, knew enough to keep his distance when he got a good look at her in the blazing light of the mattress.

"I am not afraid of these men, my aunt." The girl spoke, standing there defiantly, body straight, her dark eyes glittering. "Don Ramon, no doubt, sent them back to play the part of friends coming at the last moment. Let them see that we know they are liars, and then let them do what they will."

"Hush, Carmen!" warned the woman, turning upon her quickly. "Forgive her, amigo, she is but a child, and does not know what she is saying!"

"Let her talk!" ordered the Kid, half-angrily. "I don't care who she thinks I am. Don Ramon and Bull Galliger were going to hang me for robbing his bank, but Pancho got there in time to help me out of jail."

"You?" The woman leaned forward, peering at his face closely. *"Sí, sí, señor,* and now I see! I was there in the courtroom when they tried you and marched you away with the irons on your wrists

and two men behind you as if they were driving a leper in front of them. Carmen, this is the man I saw that day, and I swear it! Surely he would be no more a friend of the don than you or me!"

"Who cares who he is!" answered the girl. "He is a white man, and all my mother's people know the white man is anything but good. I can number all the good ones I have met on the thumb of one hand—"

A sudden yip from the little dog cut her off, and the dog was darting forward, around the burning mattress and out into the shadows with his stub of tail straight in the air. A man's voice came from out there then, punctuated by a low laugh:

"Hello, Trigger! Yo've got a nose on yuh, little dog!" The man came forward with the dog in his arms—a long and lean old man, two big guns rocking in their holsters at his hips and a grin on his face. "Hello, Kid! Didn't figure yuh might see yore old jailbird pardner again so soon, I reckon."

It was Rube Tolbert, and to both the Kid's and Pancho's surprise Carmen Bonilla wheeled with a sharp little cry and darted forward to throw her arms around the old man's neck.

Pancho, sudden jealousy gnawing at his vitals, growled, "The old rooster picks theem young, eh, no? Surely thees ees the wan she can count on her wan pretty thumb!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Into the Trap

"OF COURSE Martina would be afraid to talk!" explained Tolbert after he had taken a turn inside the shack to look at the dead man, and returned, his face looking longer and leaner.

Pancho, at a word from the Kid, had picked up an old candy pail and was taking water from the spring in the corner of the yard and throwing it on the now dying flames in the mattress.

"The Don Ramon crowd needed a sucker, an' Ignacio was it." Tolbert went in, his old eyes narrow in the moonlight. "These folks have been my friends when nobody else would be. Ignacio's been makin' moonshine whiskey for the don in the cliffs above here for seven or eight years for starvation pay. The don an' his crowd have been furnishin' the most of the drinkin' places with his hootch all around here. Martina admits Ignacio's been sellin' a little on the side of late, an' that was excuse enough to start a row an' bring on a killin'. But," he added grimly, "the killin' an' leavin' Martina an' Carmen to die tonight was for much bigger things than that."

"Well, go on!" ordered the Kid. "Tell us!"

"I learned somethin' bad was goin' to happen here before I could get out of town, Kid. Yuh see, I had to lay low for a spell, not wantin' to run with the rest of the jail folks, to be rounded up in a wad an' shot like pigs in a poke. After I hid, I was able to sneak out to steal me a good hoss an' come on. While I was hidin', the guards, Pedro Santa Anna an' Big Red Mann, was let outa jail by somebody. I heard 'em talkin'. Anyhow, I got here as quick as I could, but yuh fellas beat me by a few minutes. Ignacio an' Martina knowed too much about counterfeit money that's bein' made in these parts lately, for their own good."

"Counterfeit!"

"Hell," growled Tolbert, "the whole country's filled with it! Ain't Mexico an' the United States been goin' crazy tryin' to stop it? The don's got his foot in it somewhere, an' he's scared. I got hit over the head an' throwed in jail just 'cause they was suspicious an' couldn't figure me out.

"Government agents have been workin' together from both sides of the Border, an' it's hard to know who's who an' who ain't. The don was runnin' a lot of it right through his bank, an' they had to do somethin' fast an' big to cover up his bad money on hand. He got afraid of old Ben Word, his cashier an' they bumped 'im clean an' clear out of the picture, an' made a loud holler of robbery."

He turned to the Red Cliff Kid. "A posse was shot out of town, an' they found yuh, a fella who just about fitted a picture they'd cooked up of what the bandit was supposed to look like. Yuh had no more alibi than a bullsnake, an' yuh made the perfect goat to put all the blame on.

Mister," he grinned, "let's go in an' find a drink of Ignacio's whiskey."

"You go find it." The Kid turned and looking back in the direction of San Gabriel. "I can't think of a drink right now. I can think of only getting out of here and trying to hit back at Ramon with something that will knock the props from under him."

"Bigger men than yuh have tried that, Kid." Tolbert clamped a gnarled hand on his shoulder and smiled thinly. "San Gabriel law is Don Ramon law, an' yuh can't fight it. Ignacio was a fine fella outside of his whiskey-makin', an' that's a sin only when the fat politicians can't get the taxes on it."

Pancho appeared at that moment. He had finished with putting out the fire in the mattress and had followed the woman and the girl inside the hut and out the rear door towards the sheds. Now he was returning with a big basket in his arms and a broad grin streaking his face.

"Look at heem!" he laughed. "Surely eet ees more than half the money in the world. There is much of it in a deep hole in the rocks behind the last shed, and the foolish Martina says it is bad money and should be piled on the mattress and burned. She says—*eek,* what ees that?"

A noise was sounding on the face of the cliffs that were only a short distance away. It came pounding downward, a loose stone dislodged by a foot that had moved carelessly for a moment in the darkness. A cry of alarm came from the woman behind the house, but not a sound came from the girl back there with her.

"Hunt cover!" snarled the Kid, shoving the basket out of Pancho's hands. "Somebody's moving about up there!"

The splintering report of a shot answered him, but it did not come from the cliffs. It came, instead, from between the shack and the sheds where Carmen Bonilla had snatched down her dead uncle's old rifle from a peg above a saddle-rack and had suddenly blazed away at something. For a moment following the report no sound came from the cliffs and it looked as if the girl had fired only at some wild animal sneaking along a ledge up there until Pancho's cry of warning lifted:

"Carramba, señor, she heet sometheeng!"

It was coming then, something making a noise like a bag of grain falling and bouncing down the jagged wall. Suddenly it was rising from the shadows and bouncing out into the moonlight, a thing that seemed all arms and legs, a big hat flying off to one side and sailing away in a strong gust of wind.

"Carmen got a man!" whispered Old Rube Tolbert. "I've knowed the kid almost since she was born, an' I'm welcome among her mother's people. Apaches never miss when they shoot at—"

Another report from the old rifle in the girl's hands cut him off. Before the ringing crash of the shot died a shout came ripping down out of the darkness, then the licking flame of a Colt slamming a bullet toward the girl.

"Gun 'im, Pancho!" yelled the Kid, blazing away with both guns at the noise of running feet just as the girl's rifle let go another splintering report. "Bring 'im down!"

The ledge, however, must have broadened where the pounding feet were running. In a few seconds the sounds were dying away and a wild spasm of mocking laughter came floating back and down to them. . . . Then it was quiet.

★

AFTER they found the burly body of a dead man at the foot of the towering rocks and turned back to the shack, the old man reloaded the big pair of .45's he had snatched from one of the gun-lockers in the jail. "I never saw that dead fella, but any fool knows he belonged to the don's crowd. The gent who laughed an' run is goin' for help, an' it may not be far from here. The shootin' alone might bring it, an' we'd better get the hell outa here in a hurry."

"But, señor," quarreled Pancho, "we weel not forget the monee, no? Think, señor Keed," he added in Spanish, "who knows but what I might marry Carmen and settle down?"

They ignored him in the rush of things that followed. Tolbert's branding of Don Ramon as an out-and-out crook was no news to the Kid. Men thrown in jail on one trumped up charge after another had not been slow to curse the man and all his

clan, and now it was clear that his pretty Panchita was as much a fly in the honey as any of the rest. A woman could not live with a man without knowing whether he was straight or warped, and to protect him and her own name back there, Panchita had attempted to sacrifice two lives in a single blow.

To get away from here and hide was the only thing to do now, and Rube Tolbert was a godsend. Without him Martina and Carmen would never have consented to leaving the dead man sprawled across the table where he had slid when a burly devil facing him had slammed four bullet holes through him without warning.

Pancho's eyes gleamed when they gathered up the counterfeit money. It filled a grain bag, enough of it to convict a saint, and Martina added more to the guilt of herself and her husband when she produced four sets of copper plates from which dollar bills, twos, fives and tens had been made.

"The hole leads into a cave where the whiskey was made," she explained. "I, myself, have long helped poor Ignacio to make the whiskey, but of these and the money, señor, we had no part. Ignacio once told me there is a small printing press reached by a trap-door leading to a secret basement under the bank, and there the money was made. Less than a month ago the money and these metal things were brought here by the ugly Alphonso, the fat one who is always at the don's heel. Ignacio was afraid, but what could he say against the orders of the don?"

"Nothin'," growled Tolbert. "He sent this junk out here to prepare for this very thing tonight. At the right an' proper minute his Bull Galliger would have discovered the burned shack, then the money an' the dies in the hole, an' there would be the big lay-out of the still with 'em—all the proof in the world that Ignacio was the counterfeiter as well as the whiskey-maker the outside law has been lookin' for. All birds killed with one stone, an' the don's hands cleaned. Let's get goin'. But what yuh aim to do with that money, Kid? Goin' to throw it in a hole somewhere?"

"The right hole, yes!" nodded the Kid.

"In a railroad!" corrected Pancho, "that we will buy. Maybe two railroads, the lifelong dream of my heart, señor! And with two fine bells and two loud whistles for every engine!"

There were a couple of old worn-out burros under the sheds, and they were brought out now for the woman and the girl to ride, each carrying a hastily gathered bundle of their meager belongings. Pancho piled the money sack on Judas' back, and they were soon stealing away, hugging the shadows of the cliffs.

Tolbert had been here many times, an old border badman always on the go with the law from somewhere behind him. He thought he knew every foot of the cañon, but no one could have known more about it than Martina. She concealed them from any possible observer by entering a dense grove of piñons, then they started their weary climb through a crack-like break in the rocks that finally led them to the rim.

The Kid had been riding close to Martina and the old man, talking to them in a low voice while Pancho, the girl and her little dog brought up the rear, with Pancho still knowing enough not to start any of his love-rush here.

"It's risky, Kid," the old man warned, once they were clear of the cañon. "If yuh make the slightest slip yo're a gonner as shore as yo're born. Still," he rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, and looked at the shadows ahead, "it could work out. If we go on in a wad like we are we're almost sure to be caught, an' I can't let Martina an' Carmen go it alone. If they're caught they'll sure to be killed, 'cause they're the key to unwind all this mess an' still put the don in a hell of a fix. I aim to put them in the clear before I let go of them. Ignacio woulda done as much for me if it meant gettin' his throat cut."

"But I would never leave Carmen!" began Pancho when the Kid told him of their plan to separate. "All these years I have looked for one so tender and sweet, like—"

"And many just like me you have found!" cut in the girl, black eyes flashing as she glared at him. "A guitar strung with ribbons that are not even silk and played by a bag of wind will never fool me! Get going, little one, you smell like the billy-goat."

"You talk too much with your mouth, foolish one!" he snapped back at her in his most caustic Spanish. "I would protect

you only as one would protect a child whose hair seems to have grown down into the brain instead of up to the air. When I was about to speak of sweetness and tenderness, I was thinking of your fair aunt whose eyes are softer than the moonbeams—and not to a mustang filly like you whose beauty, compared to the wonderful Martina, is like that of a cockroach to a golden butterfly!"

★

THE KID got him away in time to prevent a fight, and Pancho was so mad at the moment he did not give a hoot where they were going. After they had headed down the ridge for a mile he snatched Judas to a halt in sudden alarm and grabbed the Kid's right arm.

"You have lost your mind, eh, no?" he squeaked. "*Caramba,* señor, this is surely no other but the way back to San Gabriel!"

"And the safest place in the world for us right now," nodded the Kid, beginning to ride on. "They'll never look for us to come back to town, Pancho, and we've got a job to do if we get even with Ramon. If we do it and come out alive—well, Carmen may learn to like you yet."

"But, señor," Pancho suddenly grinned, "could you not see with your own eyes that she is already crazy about her little Pancho? Of course her talk was a lie. The ribbons are silk, and even Judas who has to carry me knows I am no bag of wind. But you will never understand women, amigo, and I swear it."

They were like two shadows after that, but Pancho wept a couple of real tears when he learned what they were going to do.

Sneaking into San Gabriel and into the tumbledown ruins of an old house in a cluster of tall trees, they found an apparent calm about the town that now likened it to a tomb. From higher ground they had seen lights burning in Don Ramon's house. A glow still showed here or there in a cantina, but that was all. Either most of San Gabriel's male population was still out searching for the escaped prisoners, or had returned to their houses and beds to wait for daylight.

The back door of the one-story bank was just across an alleyway from the ruins, and the Kid was soon stealing away on a tour of inspection. Within thirty minutes he had discovered that the bank was like most banks in this part of the world. The walls were thick enough to withstand a cyclone. The windows and doors were covered with enough iron bars and steel shutters to hold off a siege. The flat roof was the usual weak spot, and its big skylight any nit-wit could have opened with a dime screwdriver.

"But the money, señor?" Pancho was in a good mood to shed another tear. "Think of it! A railroad, or maybe four for all I know, right in our hands, and you would return the money. Even if the dinero *is* bad, some one has spent it before, and surely we could do the same! For the sake of God, put back only a few dollars if you must, but let us try to enrich our poor bodies and souls with the rest. *Madre de Dios,* I could use a pair of boots, and maybe a jew's harp and a new dress for the pretty Carmen, eh, no?"

The Kid left him groaning. He was gone a long time, working himself back to the roofs with the big sack on his shoulder. He let himself down into the bank through the skylight on his saddle rope. In Don Ramon's private office he slid the big desk away from the wall, raised a trap-door, and went down.

It was musty down there, working by the flickering oil lamp. When the job was done he blew out the light and headed back upstairs, through the skylight and on to the roof. When he turned, squatting on one heel after freeing his rope and closing the skylight exactly as he'd found it, it looked like tragedy was at hand.

The shadow cast by the trees hid him from a second visitor just making his way to the bank roof. The newcomer was down on his hands and knees, moving like a cat on a stout plank that had been slipped across from one roof to the other.

The Kid wheeled, scurrying around to the other side of the skylight. He reached the north coaming of the roof. A leap carried him across a narrow passageway here, but even as he leaped he heard a crash behind him and a startled grunt of alarm. A-heels of that came another noise that sounded as if a horse had fallen off the roof and into the old packing cases beneath the place where the plank had

been, and that noise seemed to start every dog in San Gabriel to barking.

CHAPTER FIVE

Showdown—For Gold and Lead!

WHEN the Kid got back to him, Pancho growled, "I could have killed the devil and moved half of the hot place with much less noise! Did the roof of the bank fall?"

"Almost." The Kid had to wait to catch his breath before he could tell him what had happened. "We'll stay here until it gets quiet—"

"Easy, señor!" hissed Pancho, nudging him with his right elbow. "Eet looks like companee, eh, no?"

Somebody was coming. The dogs were still barking, setting up a hellish din in all directions. A match light had just flared up in an alleyway shack above the ruins. But it went out almost as quickly as it had come, and then the Kid heard some one swear in the darkness:

"Sprained my ankle, at least."

"Not so loud," warned a second whisper. "I tried to tell you that plank was too old to risk."

It was black right here and the underfooting an earthen floor, but the noise was enough to be heard all over the ruins. For a minute after that there was nothing but silence, then a whisper came through the darkness:

"Somebody's stable, that's all. Can't be anything else. Feeling any better, Sam?"

"Worse if anything, Jim."

"I'd like to finish up this cockeyed job and get back to Denver to the wife and kids," Jim growled impatiently.

"Quiet, Jim. Somebody's coming."

The kid had carefully put his hand on Black Ball's nose and Pancho was holding the infernal Judas to make certain he behaved himself from now on. The cautious footsteps of two men outside came to them.

"Somebody's fool horse kicking in a stable, I guess. Wonder to me that Don Ramon doesn't order Bull Galliger to have every dog in town shot."

"Si, si, señor," agreed the second

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walker. "At times they are ver' bad dogs, but dogs weel be dogs, no?"

Both those voices belonged to men the Kid would not forget for a long time. The first speaker was Big Red Mann, bully of the jail, and the second none other than Pedro Santa Anna, a cool devil who could smile while he cut a man's throat.

When they seemed to have gone on one of the men in the darkness toward the alley-way spoke again.

"I'm sure it's broken now, Jim. It's swelling. I've got to unlace my shoe."

"Unlace it but leave it on," warned the second voice. "We've got to get the hell out of here."

"You'd better stay where you are," advised the Kid in a low voice. "At least until we know you. We've got you covered. We're not of the Ramon bunch, if that'll help you."

"How do we know that?" answered a voice after a moment of shocked silence. "And who the hell are *you?*"

"I'm on the business end of a .45," whispered the Kid, "and you're looking at the muzzle. But if it'll help you any I'm the Red Cliff Kid."

"Por Dios!" growled Pancho. "Why put the head in a lion's mouth?"

"All right, Kid, I guess you win," came back a voice. "I'm Jim Bradley, United States Treasury Department. With me is Sam Goodnight, and he wears the same badge."

"And now you see!" hissed Pancho. "Out of what you call the frying pan into the fire."

"Don't worry, if it's *really* the Red Cliff Kid." Bradley's voice carried a hint of a relieved chuckle. "We're not your enemy by a damned sight! Easy. I'm coming forward with my hands up. . . ."

Down at the lower end of the alleyway Big Red Mann suddenly gripped his companion's arm and leaned forward to peer back the way they had come. "I saw a light flash in the ruins of the old house just behind the bank! And I tell you—listen to that!"

The barking of the dogs had died away, but now another hellish din was setting up, and it had started just above the old house. A couple of prowling curs up there had seen and heard something that did not belong to the natural gloom of the alleyway. The brutes were charging forward, their yelping raising a furious noise.

It was like all thunderation trying to run the devil out of his den in a very few seconds. Unholstering their six-shooters, Mann and the big Pedro started a wild dash for the ruins.

Dogs were swarming into the alleyway. Dangerous now in a pack, the excitement robbing every brute of his senses, a swarm of them charged the fleeing pair in an inglorious uproar of baying and barking.

"Slime of the devil!" roared the big Pedro in Spanish. "I am bitten! *Si, si, amigo,* on both the leg and where I sit! Kill them, lest they drag us down!"

Mann had gone as crazy as a fool; shooting and slapping at dogs with both hands as he backed to the east wall beside the bleeding Pedro. "Get here, *ever'body! Anybody!* Help! Help! Damn it, they're eatin' us up, right on our feet!"

It was such a mess that neither the baying dogs nor the fighting men could take time to notice the horse and the burro stealing quietly out of the ruins, with the man in Black Ball's big saddle cursing the ill-luck of a broken leg.

THE brainless dogs could not have been more help to the Kid and Pancho had they been trained for weeks for just such a thing. The baying, the snapping and snarling and the yelling of the two trapped under-marshals turned out the town. People came on the run with guns, sticks and stones to fall upon the pack with merciless blows before they could bring the uproar to an end and lead the two torn and bleeding men away.

Taking advantage of every second, the Kid kept to the denser shadows and led the way to the creek.

At the gate in the thick wall behind Don Ramon's barn Pancho set himself to work on the rusty lock, and within a few minutes more they were going inside with the Kid in the lead. Just as he stepped into the black hallway of the barn, a dog let out a low growl somewhere. It was almost like a slap in the face when Old Rube Tolbert spoke:

"Who's that with yuh, Kid?"

"Two—two U. S. government agents," stammered the Kid, choking back his surprise. "What are you doing *here?*"

"In the past," growled the old man, "I've allus made it a point to go an' hide where I'm least expected to be found. We let the burros an' that hoss I stole go. . . ." His growl deepened. "But what the hell are yuh doin' paradin' around with the law? I don't like it, anyhow yuh wanta wrop it up. It usually kicks back!"

"I know you, Rube Tolbert," whispered Jim Bradley. "I know you're wanted a couple of hundred miles from here for being mixed up in a gambling house shooting, but we're not after small fry. Buck Steel, our boss, should be in the house with Don Ramon, and we're here to see him."

"Steel is in the house." Tolbert must have grinned in the darkness. "I know Buck Steel. Even been arrested by 'im on a train robbery charge that didn't stick. He had to let me loose. . . .

"I took a sneak-about just a few minutes ago. There seems to be a devil of a quarrel goin' on, an' yuh'd better watch yore step. I think the don's got gunmen hid all over the house. Some are outside in the bushes. I saw 'em, but they didn't see me. Have yuh told 'em anything about Ignacio an' Martina, Kid?"

"Everything that I could," nodded the Kid. "It looks like we're lucky, Rube! Are you going with us or keeping back out of it?"

"I was never knowed," grinned the old man, "to keep out of a gunfight if I could help it. Martina an' Carmen are hidin' up in the hayloft with Trigger, the dog. Are yuh shore yuh can trust these tin-badges? I'm damned if I ever could stand the smell of the law, but . . . . "

* * *

In the south side of the house, pacing the floor of the huge living room under the great black beams, Don Augusto Ramon was a fit subject to be hog-tied and gagged. Sandy-mustached and burly-chested, Buck Steel, the federal agent and two bank inspectors, who might have been ribbon clerks for their looks, stood on the hearth with their backs to the fireplace, quietly watching him.

The don's wife was there, sitting like a mouse in the corner near the dining room

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door. She was scared but still putting her trust in the fact that Bull Galliger and three of the best gunmen in San Gabriel were hiding in the library on the north side of the room.

"To think of it!" Ramon was fuming. "A great man, such as I am!" He slapped his chest. "My house alight at this hour while agents of the government question me like a common criminal! Gentlemen, again I tell you I do not like it. I am a friend to the rich and poor alike—"

"An' that's why we come here," cut in Steel with his lazy Western drawl. "Why, we know yo're on the up-an'-up, Don Ramon."

"But you were here only a week ago!" snarled the don. "The week before that you were here. And yet before that others were here, slipping about behind my back, asking questions of lowly people—"

"That was plumb mean, yeah." Buck Steel was stalling for something and glancing at the front door now and then. "We ain't accused yuh of nothin', have we? Ain't said yuh was a criminal. Why, Don Ramon, all we come here for—"

He halted abruptly, unable to keep from cocking his head to one side like a man expecting a signal to come from one direction, but hearing it from another, instead. It was a noise like a mocking bird tuning up to sing. No one could mimic a mocking bird better than Sam Goodnight, and the notes that now reached Steel's ears were telling him something he desperately wanted to know.

"What is it, señor?" Suspicious now of even that birdlike call, the don had stopped his wild pacing and was glaring at him. "Finish what you would say. What—what," he took a step backward, "is the meaning of that strange look in your eye?"

"Don't get excited," intoned Steel, lifting his hand. "There ain't a bit of use of it. I believe I'll take one of yore cigars, if yuh don't mind, Don Ramon."

He moved toward the table, the don watching him. The two bank examiners were remaining where they were, but they were not as cool as Steel. Their faces had gone white, their lips dry.

Steel walked on to a table across the room. He lifted the lid of a rosewood box and selected a long, fat cigar with evidently a great deal of care. He bit the end off of it, and then lifted both hands toward his lower vest pockets as if searching for a match.

"Quick, Augusto!" screamed Panchita. "He reaches for his guns!"

"Duck, boys!" Steel boomed the warning as he dropped to a squat, wheeling on one heel with two old-fashioned .45's in his big hands just as the thunder of six-shooters outside the house started stabbing the night.

"Steady, Don Ramon!" Steel was still bellowing. "Yo're covered! The house is surrounded! Yuh ain't got a chance! My boys have found yore damned counterfeitin' plant!"

"No!" Panchita shot out of her chair with a small revolver in her hand as she backed to the door. "I will kill—"

Two hands cut short her scream. They came out of the darkness behind her. One caught her by the hair, the other by the arm, snatching her backward, the little weapon exploding in her hand and plowing a bullet into the floor just beyond her feet. San Francisco Don Juan Jesucristo —plain Pancho for short—was on the job!

"God, señor!" Don Ramon's nerve was suddenly gone. "Careful with your fire!"

One of the pale-faced men on the hearth had jammed back in the fireplace like a scared hare. The other had rammed a six-shooter against the don's spine.

The front door came open with a crash. The Red Cliff Kid, backed by Jim Bradley, stood there, each with cocked guns in their hands just as the library door opened.

Now the room seemed to spring full of gunfire. Men in the library were snarling and falling back, ripped belly-high by a thundering burst of lead from the weapons in the hands of the Kid and Jim Bradley, while from outside Rube Tolbert, the old Border wolf, gunned in his share of the hell through a window until the men inside that book-lined room were flat on the floor and wiped out of the fight.

"Gentlemen! *Gentlemen!*" wailed the don. "I surrender! Of course there is an old printing press in the bank, but God knows there is no bad money with it!"

All San Gabriel had jumped to life by this time. Gunfire was raking the street. Lowly looking men never suspected as anything more than common goat-herders

and lazy drifters were springing to violent life.

"But, señor," wept the don an hour later when they led him out of his bank and put him in jail, so addled he scarcely knew what he was saying, "I am sure the money was not there. Surely my lazy Alfonso carried it away to old Ignacio's hut as I told him. But now I have seen it all stacked back in place—"

"We know all about that now," grinned Jim Bradley. "That is," he winked at Steel, "we know now, and our thanks go to the Red Cliff Kid."

They were heading back to the don's house after that. Steel's men were all over the place. A doctor had been called and was setting Sam Goodnight's broken leg.

The Kid heard music and headed on to the kitchen. As he cracked the door open he saw that it was Pancho and Panchita.

The little Pancho sat on the corner of the table, swinging his leg and plunking out his whispering tune with a half-emptied bottle of wine beside him. Panchita was in a chair, resting her tear-wet face against his knee.

"So," nodded the Kid, frowning to keep from smiling, "you talked them out of locking her up with the rest of the gang."

"But after all, señor," Pancho grinned, "you—you said it was no place to use as a cage for a monkey with the mange, much less a man. If that is true—and you can be sure I would never call you a liar—then you know it is not for a woman.

"Besides," he shrugged, "Panchita says she loves me. To prove it she told the government men that the sneaky Pasquale was the one who ran the machine to print the money, and they have gone now to throw Pasquale in jail."

"Then," the Kid grinned in spite of himself, "Carmen and Martina are safe."

"Carramba," growled Pancho. "They were always safe. Pancho was only having a leetle fon. They both eat wild onions, and even a cow should know better than that!"

And he turned his attention to the still sobbing Panchita. . . .

THE END

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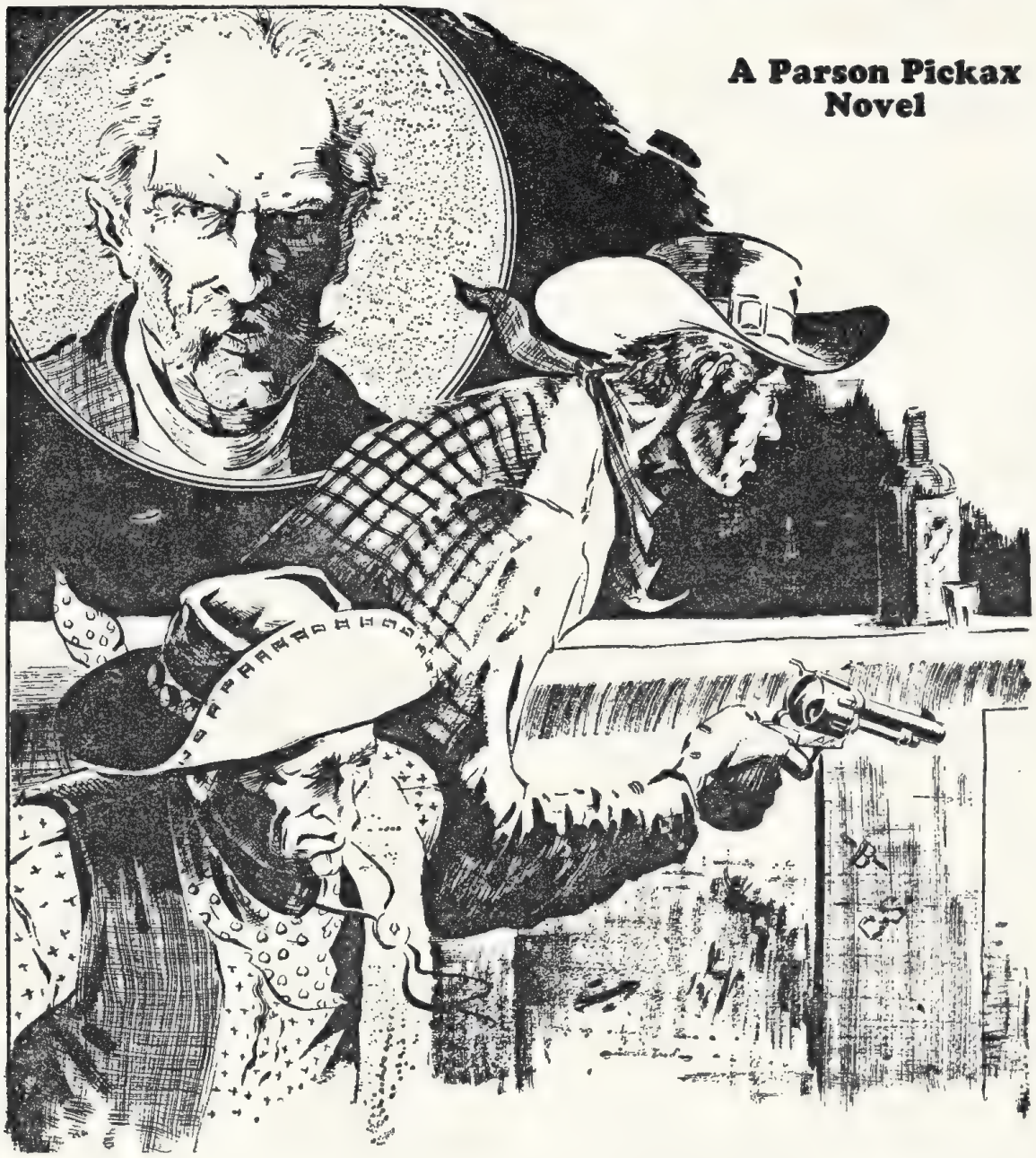
★ ★ THE PARSON OF

A Parson Pickax Novel



All that the hell-bending Parson Pickax wanted was to make a decent town out of roaring Owlhoot Junction, and build a meeting house for his flock. . . . All that Big George McWhorter wanted was to make a decent corpse out of the Parson before the Reverend started backing up his Bible-talk with bullets!

CHAPTER ONE

Owlhooter Paradise

PARSON PICKAX cleaned and oiled his venerable Colt, his long jaw set with stiff determination. When he was done he examined his conscience, searched the Scriptures with scrupulous attentiveness and sallied forth to make medicine with Seco Snyder, gun-tough and killer.

Owlhoot Junction

By Charles W. Tyler

Parson Pickax jerked his old Colt from under his long-tailed coat. . . .

With his gun-belt looped around his gaunt middle under his long rusty-black coat, a worn, much-thumbed Bible clasped against him like a staunch shield, the Parson left the boarding house of Launcelot Jenks and stalked slowly down Chadron

Street toward the den of perdition that was Rick Ringgold's saloon.

The Parson had been christened Philander Pickarts, but somewhere down the U. P. trail the wild Irishmen of General Dodge, with whom he had worked shoulder to shoulder, had called him Parson Pickax. Not only had this strange man proved himself to be a hardy son of toil, who had labored diligently for his daily bread, but a student of the Scriptures as well, finding there quotations to fit every situation.

Parson Pickax was a broad-minded, worldly man, as one must be who rubbed elbows with the raw frontier. A Godly man, too, the Parson, hating the wicked and unjust, and working always to further law and order.

He had played a prominent part in the reformation of Hungry Junction; he had been instrumental in whipping the ruling toughs of Jericho City to their knees, and had arrived recently in Saint David to lend what aid he might in the taming of this Purgatory of the plains.

Peal Ivy, the militant and crusading editor and publisher of the *Saint David Blade,* had sent for the Parson, feeling that the town needed the sobering influence of a church, but now Ivy regretted it, fearing for the life of his friend. Two days ago Maury Dines, the town marshal, had sprawled down before the blazing gun of Seco Snyder, and Saint David was without law.

Marshal Dines had been a good man, and a courageous one; his cardinal sin was that he was slow on the draw. Already it was being whispered about that his successor was like to be a man chosen by the toughs, who were bossed by Big George McWhorter, representing the whiskey and gambling interests.

The seamed face of Peal Ivy looked out from the grimy window of the *Blade,* and, seeing the stiff-walking Parson, quick apprehension kindled in his eyes. He hurried to the door.

"Evenin', Parson."

"Evenin' to ye, Brother Ivy."

"Seco Snyder come in on the stage," said Peal Ivy. "He went into Rick Ringgold's place."

"So I heerd," said Parson Pickax, stroking his long chin.

"You aren't lookin' for him, by any chance, Parson?" The editor's troubled eye touched the other's gun-belt with its sagging Walker Colt.

"Seek an' ye shall find," quoth the Parson sonorously. "I go to convert a sinner from the error of his evil ways."

"Good Lord!" gasped Peal Ivy. He went on. "There isn't a man can stand up to Seco in a shoot-out. He'll kill you, as he did Maury Dines. I'm sorry I asked you to come to Saint David."

"It is written in the Book of Job to tread down the wicked," intoned the Parson. "An' I am a right pert treader."

Peal Ivy shook his head resignedly. A look at the Parson's determined jaw was enough to convince a man that there was no use arguing. Already blood had been spilled in the county seat fight; there would be more.

Yesterday the Parson had preached Maury Dines' funeral sermon, and the closing words of that sermon had been a warning to Big George McWhorter, Seco Snyder and the rest, that the smoking wrath of God was about to descend upon them.

The trouble was that the sheriff over at New Babylon was lined up with the wrong crowd. Big George and Seco Snyder had little concern with the wrath of God, just so long as they had the sheriff with them.

★

PARSON PICKAX continued on down Chadron Street. His angular frame was heightened by the battered stovepipe hat he wore; his long coat flapped about his bony shanks. His free right arm was loosehung, while a ham-size fist reached far below a too-short sleeve.

Everything about him spelled bungling awkwardness. His scarecrow figure held no hint of speed or dexterity; rather, it gave the impression of indolence. A bone-rack, it seemed, that might easily fall apart under the first breath of violence.

Long shadows lay on Chadron Street as the westing sun wheeled home below the prairie rim. The supper hour was past, and groups were gathered on gallery and sidewalk.

Grinning faces watched the Parson.

Now and then a lounger addressed him with thinly veiled ridicule.

"Hi, Deacon."

"Make any converts today, Parson?"

"Well, well, if it ain't John the Baptist!"

To each, Parson Pickax gave a benign smile and a lazy flip of that big right paw. "Howdy, neighbor. Howdy to ye, brother. Don't fergit the Friday night prayer meetin' in the Belly-Up Bar."

And so the Parson came to Rick Ringgold's place, the Hell's Delight Saloon. He pushed through the batwing doors like a rangy longhorn steer thrusting incautiously through a brush thicket.

The high drone of voices tapered off, and a hush fell that was like the silence in a forest after the quitting of a gusty wind. Eyes hit at the figure angling up to the bar, and somewhere a voice said, "Hell, it's that old gospel-shouter."

"Howdy, gents," the Parson offered amiably. "I was jist makin' a little razoo, like Paul told the Roman's an' I bring redemption to a place of iniquity."

Seco Snyder, standing midway down the bar, pulled around, his eyes hot with whiskey. He had heard from friends of the Parson's sermon of vengeance. Seeing the gun-belt under the coat of the preacher, his right hand moved stealthily toward his holstered sixgun.

Western Nebraska was wild and tough, and Saint David had sprung out of the weeds with the coming of the railroad. Parson Pickax was its first minister, and the citizenry regarded him with mingled doubt and disdain.

Rick Ringgold, thumbs hooked in the armpits of his ornate vest, stood at the end of the bar talking to Big George McWhorter. He eyed the Parson tolerably, and winked at Big George. The latter grunted, scowled. He didn't know about this old coot who came sashaying into the Hell's Delight, packing a Bible and a six-shooter.

A bull-chested bartender gaped at the preacher; then flung a look at Ringgold for the signal to throw him out. However, the proprietor seemed to prefer to let matters run their course.

Parson Pickax took his place at the bar a few feet from Seco Snyder. Here he turned and held up his toil-worn hand.

"My text this evenin', gents," he began with deep-toned solemnity, "is taken from the twentieth chapter of Job: 'The triumph of the wicked is short as Ringgold's drinks, an' the sinner is slapped down in his bloom.' " The Parson revised the quotation slightly, as he frequently did. He went on, "Followin' a few words, there will be prayer an' benediction. Any hombres wishful to take part in the services are plumb welcome to indulge, no end." He regarded Seco Snyder benignly and from twinkling eyes.

"What the hell are yuh lookin' at me for, yuh old buzzard?" snarled Seco.

"The sinner I chastise," said the Parson, "an' the errin' son shall have coals heaped on his head; hence I call on you to repent, or get your unworthy hide scorched."

Somewhere there was a hoot of derision and raucous laughter. A hard-bitten figure at the bar said, "How about a drink, Parson?"

Parson Pickax said, "An' now let us pray: Dear Lord, be merciful to the transgressor. His name is Seco Snyder, an' the blood of innocent men is on him. For mercy sake, be charitable, for unless he mends his ways I aim to convert him—either by hot lead or by hell-fire preachin' of the Word!"

Seco Snyder uttered a roar of rage, and jerked at his six-shooter. Men lurched away from the bar and out of the line of fire. Rick Ringgold yelled at the bartender, who grabbed for a bung-starter. Big George McWhorter yapped a startled oath.

The Parson was handicapped by his position, and his Walker Colt was draped around by the long coat, making it difficult to draw quickly. Seco Snyder, seeing that he had the other at a disadvantage, moved with cold deliberation, his beady eyes savage, malignant.

The distance between them was no more than two paces. Parson Pickax made a half-move for his gun; then dropped into a crouch and launched his bony frame at Seco Snyder's middle with amazing speed in his lanky frame.

The gunman fired, but the Parson was under the screaming missile and coming in like a thunderbolt, his long, angular arms flung out for a hold. His shoulder

hit Seco Snyder in the stomach, and the killer uttered a gusty grunt, as he was driven backward and off balance.

Years of hard labor had toughened the Parson, where soft living and whiskey had taken their toll of the burly gun-tough. He lifted Seco; then dropped him like a sack of oats. A clawlike hand closed on the six-shooter and wrenched it free.

The bartender made a swipe at the Parson's head, but missed. The Parson straightened, and smacked the fat man leaning across the bar fair on the nose with the barrel of Seco Snyder's Colt, eliminating the gentleman from the fray.

Seco heaved to hands and knees, but the descending sixgun caught him on the skull, flooring him again. A big bouncer circled warily behind the Parson, but the maneuver was tardy and ill-timed, for the preacher had a full head of steam up and was covering ground like a runaway train. He dragged the bulky choreman of the Hell's Delight and heaved him out onto the sidewalk, unhinging one of the batwing doors in the process.

Parson Pickax retrieved his Bible and his hat, and stood there then, balancing Seco Snyder's six-shooter in his right hand. "I can hear the devil groanin'," he said.

"That ain't the devil, Parson," said an onlooker. "It's Baldy Johnston," indicating the beefy bartender.

This worthy was sagged against the bar, holding onto his nose, while blood dripped onto the polished surface. Both of his eyes were swelling shut and he sounded like a mourning dove.

Rick Ringgold was cursing softly. Big George McWhorter chewed hard on his fat cigar, at last finding words. "You're diggin' your grave, Parson," he said darkly. "This is he toughest town on the Union Pacific, but it suits us. If you don't like it, you can take the seat of your pants in your hand an' vamose."

"I have heard that the town is called Owlhoot Junction," said Parson Pickax, "an' that it is besotten with sin. Truly it is a fertile vineyard, an' here I will build a church." He turned toward the door. At the threshold he paused, to flip a jaunty paw at this, his first congregation. "Hallelujah! Revive us ag'in!" And he stalked away up Chadron Street.

CHAPTER TWO

Hell in Nebraska

PEAL IVY gave the affair in the Hell's Delight Saloon a place on the front page under a flaring black banner.

FIGHTING PARSON BRAVES LION'S DEN!

As Moses brought water from the rock, manna from Heaven and raised up the fiery serpent, so has the man who calls himself Parson Pickax performed a great deed in our community. Already has he struck terror in the hearts of the forces of evil in our fair town. Saint David, shunned by decent people and populated with toughs and crooks, has been derisively labeled Owlhoot Junction, a name we resent, however much it is deserved.

The *Blade* stands for law and order; we have championed the fight for right, but our feeble efforts have not been enough. We need honest and fearless men to join the fray. If we have to have whiskey, we want good whiskey. If we have to have gambling, we want a square deal. We are not snooty as concerns tarnished ladies, but we must make the streets safe for our wives and our daughters.

Saint David is well-located; it is on the railroad, and we can offer every advantage to settlers. We deserve to be the county seat, but we cannot hope for that honor until we have washed our dirty linen. This fall election will decide whether we are to take our rightful place in the sun, or whether New Babylon is to retain this cherished plum.

Now is the time for all good men to put their shoulders to the wheel of progress. A churchless community is like a body without a soul; a cart without a horse. Parson Pickax has shown what a fearless man can do. Congratulations to you, Parson. And now, to quote from the Right Reverand Philander Pickarts, "Let's get together and kick the devil to hell out of Owlhoot Junction!"

The story of Saint David, or Owlhoot Junction, was as old as the first Judas; it was the story of blood and greed, and men crucified. The town sprang into being with the laying of westward steel, and, when railhead moved on, somehow managed to survive the swift exodus of camp followers and parasites.

A few stayed—a few good men; a few bad. The cockle and the wheat. Peal Ivy and his wife put down their roots, as did Maury Dines and young Andy Pike, blacksmith, and Launcelot Jenks and Matilda.

And there was Prudence Parmlee, pretty as a new-minted dollar. Some said Prudence stayed on account of Andy, and some said Andy stayed on account of Prudence, and there you are.

And there were others. They were from Vermont and Ohio and York State and Missouri; they were the children of the west, each with a story as long as your arm—stories mostly of hardship and privation and sorrow.

They had settled in Saint David for various reasons. First, there was the river, the South Platte. Sometimes it wasn't much of a river, but it was a river. And there were a few cottonwoods. Not much like the elms and maples and good old shagbark walnuts back home, but they were trees. And there was grass, lots of it. Lastly, there was the railroad—not much of a railroad, but it had ties and rails, and trains ran on it. A kind of a steel link, it was, with civilization.

What was yonder in Wyoming, and beyond—besides redskins and trouble—they didn't know. And so Saint David looked pretty good. And so old man Jenks and Matilda built a boarding house, and Peal Ivy started his pioneer newspaper, and Andy Pike set up his blacksmith shop.

And everything looked as fine as a field of growing corn.

Settlers started drifting in, and Texas trail herds rolled up the dust in their northward trek. There were bearded miners, heading for the Black Hills, and freighters, and land sharks and cowboys—and toughs. Freight and stage lines made junction there.

With Saint David on the way to becoming a booming prairie metropolis, a movement was begun to make it the county seat.

Immediately a howl of protest arose from New Babylon. While admitting that Saint David possessed the advantage of being on the railroad, the citizenry of New Babylon pointed out that their town already had established suitable accommodations for county offices, that they had a school and church, and, above all, were a people of peaceful pursuits.

Saint David, on the other hand, New Babylon declared, was a sink of iniquity, populated largely by toughs and renegades of the worst sort, with only a makeshift school, no church of God and no law.

This struggle for the county seat was, even in these roaring seventies, an old story in Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas, leading frequently to turbulence and bloodshed, just as now fierce hatreds blazed, with politics, greed and graft playing their part.

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

The killing of Maury Dines was another nail in the coffin of Saint David, and the New Babylon partisans cried that it was a further example of the unbridled wickedness of Saint David. It was rightly called Owlhoot Junction, they said.

To add to the complications, sentiment in Saint David itself was sharply divided. The better element, favoring the county seat movement, were strongly opposed by the gambling and whiskey interests, as represented by Big George McWhorter and Rick Ringgold, who claimed that a wide open town brought in more money.

Realizing that unless something was done, the county seat movement was doomed to go down in defeat at the coming election, Peal Ivy had sent for Parson Pickax.

The Parson, filled with a holy zeal, and being an old battler from away back, had promptly accepted the call, arriving in Saint David just in time to preach Maury Dines' funeral sermon.

The affair in the Hell's Delight Saloon, serving as a preface to the challenge in the *Blade,* threatened to touch off the powder keg, and everybody held his breath, waiting for the explosion.

The first task that now confronted the town fathers was the selection of a new marshal. It was, clearly, a job for a man with courage and a fast gun.

Doc Byler said they ought to import a professional town-tamer—somebody like Bat Masterson or Wild Bill Hickok. Gideon Crowningshield, who ran the general store, suggested Parson Pickax.

The Parson, however, protested. He said it would cramp his style, for a marshal was bound by certain civil laws and restrictions, where a preacher's activities were limited only by the blue sky and the Kingdom of God.

Peal Ivy then presented the name of young Andy Pike, the blacksmith. After some discussion, he was approached on the subject.

Andy was shoeing a mule. A fine, strapping fellow, he was, in his leather apron, blue-eyed and tawny. He had learned his trade at his father's forge back in Vermont. He was sober, industrious, and as honest as homespun wool.

Peal Ivy told him why they had come, feeling a little guilty, for asking a man to step into the boots of the late lamented Maury Dines was like inviting him to make his peace with God and prepare for the worst.

The mule was a whacking big brute with a mean eye, but Andy slapped the beast around, said "Whoa!" brusquely, and picked up and straddled a hind leg, without giving the obstreperous animal a chance to decide whether or not to let fly.

"You know what the job is," said Peal Ivy. "Just keep the peace of an evening, and see that the boys don't overstep themselves." He mopped his worried brow.

Andy peeled off the old shoe. "What's the job pay?"

Peal told him, and Andy said, "When do I start?"

"Well, today is Friday," said Peal. "I guess this evenin'."

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THERE were those who questioned the propriety of having a prayer meeting in a saloon, but Parson Pickax held to his decision to hold services in the Belly-Up Bar.

"There ain't no percentage in preachin' to four walls," the Parson said. "A lot of churches have died a-bornin' on empty pews. Yuh don't go up the trail with a few strays; yuh got to have a herd. There'll be a right smart crowd in the Belly-Up, an' the boys will have pelfry in their pokes. One collection, an' we get the foundation for a house o' God."

"'Tain't fitten," Mrs. Jenks protested, "raisin' up funds in a saloon to build a meetin' house."

"The church I aim to build," said the parson, "will be for saints an' sinners, an' I figger to make the sinners help pay for it."

The Belly-Up was a little out of the ordinary run of saloons, in that it was bossed by a lady, one Belle McGee. A widow-woman, the Parson termed her. Her late spouse, following an embroglio with a tough gentleman, had taken wing for a fairer land.

Mrs. McGee was big and rangy and tough, and she could swear like a mule-skinner, but many a poverty-stricken sodbuster and his family had been the recipient of her generosity. She sold a good brand of whiskey, and refused her girls the privilege of rolling drunks. In addition to whiskey, she sold Hostetter's Bitters, good for man or beast.

Parson Pickax had made the acquaintance of Belle back up the U. P. trail. Mrs. McGee liked the Parson, and she had an idea that a prayer meeting in her place would be good advertising. Further, it was bound to steal trade away from the more pretentious Hell's Delight, for one night, at least. It tickled her to think that she would be putting something over on Rick Ringgold and Big George McWhorter, both of whom she despised.

At the hour set for the services, the Belly-Up Bar was jammed to the doors, and a most cosmopolitan gathering it was. There were many, like Prudence Parmlee, Mrs. Jenks and the station agent's wife, who had never been in a saloon in their lives, just as there were those who had never been to a prayer meeting.

The few who owned hymn books brought them. Belle McGee's piano player didn't know much about church music, but what he lacked in technique he made up for in enthusiasm.

The opening song was Onward Chris-

tian Soldiers, which seemed prophetic. The bullet-nicked piano fairly quivered, while the rafters rang to, "Onward Christian Soldiers! Marching as to war. . . ." And on through, "Gates of hell can never 'Gainst that Church prevail. . . ."

Young Andy Pike, wearing his marshal's star, shared a hymn book with Prudence Parmlee. The girl's eyes were shining, but in her heart a dread fear cast its shadow. She had been happy in Saint David, happy in her work of teaching school in an abandoned box car. She was proud to be a part of this settlement of the frontier.

Behind her were sad memories and tragedy. Her mother had died of cholera at a wagon camp on the Missouri; her father, never strong, had slipped away from her during the journey across the prairies. Young Andy Pike had helped and befriended her in many ways. They were in love, and would one day be married and build a home here in Saint David.

Something told her that trouble was close. She had scolded Andy for accepting the job as marshal, even though he was so big and strong it seemed that nothing could hurt him, but he had made light of her fears, saying the extra money thus earned meant that their dreams would become reality so much the sooner; beside, being marshal was a kind of civic duty and an honor.

Andy Pike slanted a downward glance at the shiny star now, there on his homespun hickory shirt, and gave Prudence a reassuring grin.

The girl smiled bravely, but she could not help but feel that her happiness was too good to last.

Parson Pickax prayed, loud and earnestly. "Dear Lord, lend an ear. This voice yuh hear is comin' from Belle McGee's place in Saint David, Nebraska. Mebbe all yuh know it by is Owlhoot Junction. Or, likely, yuh never heerd of it at all, on account I reckon this is the first church service that was ever held in these diggin's.

"We're due west on Omaha on the Union Pacific, an' all trains stop here, includin' the Glory Train. I tried to get in a word with yuh over to the Hell's Delight a few days back, but the devil was a pawin' sod an' I couldn't scurcely make myself heard above the vast multitude."

At this point, two tough-looking men entered and swaggered to the bar. Guns were slung at their hips. They appeared not to notice the bowed heads, or hear the Parson.

"Whiskey, ol' girl," one demanded.

"Ain't no whiskey served until after prayer meetin'," hissed Belle McGee. "An' take off your hats, ye damn' heathen! Don't ye hear the Parson a-talkin' to the Lord A'mighty?"

"A prayer meetin'!" hooted the taller of the pair derisively. "Don't make me laugh."

"We want a drink," snarled the other, "prayer meetin' or no. Come on, set out yore red-eye." He banged on the bar with his fist.

"Plenty other saloons," said Belle McGee. "Git out!"

"The Belly-Up suits us," persisted the tall tough.

Men and women scowled at the disturbers, and someone said, "Quiet."

Peal Ivy recognized the intruders as two of Big George McWhorter's satellites, Alf Walker and Nick Dunn. It was easy to guess that they had been sent here to break up the prayer meeting, and, possibly, put the new marshal to test. The editor of the *Blade* glanced nervously at Andy Pike.

The Parson, standing near the piano, opened one eye, but continued to pray. "We are sore tried, Lord. Give us patience to bear with the transgressor an' the unbeliever, an if yuh can't give us patience, give us strength to cuff 'im to a peak."

Alf Walker and Nick Dunn swung around and put their backs to the bar, thumbs hooked suggestively in their gunbelts.

"Listen to the ole rooster!" jeered Alf Walker.

"Hell, there ain't no God in Nebraskie," said Nick Dunn, "an' there ain't no law in Owlhoot Junction."

Young Andy Pike stiffened. He felt Prudence Parmlee's fingers tighten on his arm. He found voice at last. "There *is* law here," he said, "an' there's a God in Nebraska. An' if you fellers don't like our way, get out of town."

"Git out of town?" snarled Alf Walker.

"You try an' run us out," he boasted belligerently.

"He can't even run us out of the Belly-Up," rasped Nick Dunn.

Andy Pike pulled away from the girl and started forward.

Alf Walker's hand drifted toward his gun-butt. "Stay back, or I'll blast yuh out from under yore hat!"

CHAPTER THREE

Medicine for a Killer

PARSON PICKAX, his hands clasped behind him under his coat-tails, rocked on his heels and rolled up his eyes, "Yea, verily, it is a wicked world," he said in a sepulchre-like tone.

Horrified, Peal Ivy suddenly became aware of the fact that Andy Pike was unarmed; yet he kept on coming, just as he had approached that mean-looking mule. When there was a job to be done, the young blacksmith was not one for dallying. With that big shock of taffy-colored hair and those blue eyes, kindled now with the fires of determination, he looked like a prairie Viking.

Alf Walker was a killer, while Nick Dunn leaned more to the crafty side. Observing that the new marshal wore no gunbelt, and aware that the shooting of a defenseless man was bound to arouse public feeling to an ugly pitch, Nick Dunn resorted to a trick.

"All right, Marshal," he said, "I quit." He pulled his six-shooter, reversed it and thrust the butt toward Andy Pike.

Unwittingly the young, inexperienced marshal walked into the trap. He accepted the proffered Colt—and in that act became an armed man, and legitimate prey for Nick Dunn's companion, standing there braced for action, not two paces away.

Alf Walker threw his gun. Andy Pike froze, looking stupidly from the weapon in his hand to the gunman.

In that instant, the right hand of Parson Pickax jerked from under his rusty-black coat, bearing his old Walker Colt, its hammer eared full back.

The piano player let out a screech and dove for shelter. Women screamed, and men flung out of the way. The sudden action of the Parson caught the attention of Alf Walker, as his startled eye jumped in that direction. Belatedly he pulled his gun around.

The old six-smoke in the hand of Parson Pickax bellowed mightily, and its snarling slug belted Alf Walker's .45 from a mangled fist.

"Smite a scorner," thundered the Parson, "an' the simple will beware. Proverbs, nineteen; twenty-five."

"Up jumped the devil!" cackled Belle McGee. "Durn my hide, Parson, you're as handy with a hawg-laig as ye are at spoutin' Scripter."

Prudence Parmlee breathed again, and there were tears in her eyes when she looked at the Parson. "Thank God! Oh, I was afraid they were going to kill him."

"The Lord was a-figgerin' ways to warp it to Satan two thousand years ago," said the Parson, "an' he's got it all writ' down in the Book. A man jist wants to read what it says; an' when the ruckus starts, commence a-prayin' an' a-shootin'."

"I guess I was pretty much a fool," said Andy Pike ruefully.

"Live an' learn," said the Parson. "It tells in Genesis how Abram armed his servants an' pursued the gun-toughs an' hardcases thereabouts way back to the hills."

Belle McGee set out glasses for Alf Walker and Nick Dunn and filled them to the brim from a bottle on the back bar. "You two hellions come in here fer a drink. All right, have one on the house."

Cursing, the bullet-stung Alf caught up his glass and had the contents well down before he realized that he was drinking Hostetter's Bitters. He let out a howl and flung the glass to the floor.

Men in the saloon roared with glee. "Look at Alf takin' his medicine!"

"Haw, a dose o' lead an' a dose o' bitters."

Alf Walker and Nick Dunn headed for the door, muttering oaths and vowing vengeance. One or two good ladies, who had mercifully fainted, were revived, and the servces were resumed.

They sang Old Hundred, and Parson Pickax expounded concerning the needs of a church house. "Askin' the Lord to join us in a saloon," he said, "may shock a few of ye, but directly we figger to build a church house. There's them as are

ag'in' a church, the same as they're ag'in' law an' order. They're all for whiskey an' gamblin' an' hell-raisin'.

"Come a-Sunday, all ye got in Owlhoot Junction is a mess of hangovers an' empty pokes. It's like ridin' a merry-go-round—yuh spent your money, an' where you been?

"Paul, he says the church is purchased with blood. An' Saint Luke allows yuh got to do your enemies, an' do 'em good. So let's have at 'em. The purtiest sight that ever blessed the eye of man is a church spire a-standin' over a town. An' we goin' to build one, come hell or high water."

After leading in, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing!" the Parson passed the hat. "All right, ladies an' gents, kick in. Feed the kitty." There was the pleasant jingling of silver and gold coins. Painted ladies, hard-bitten Texas cowboys, bearded miners, plainsmen, merchants and tinhorns, all contributed.

And so the first church of Saint David took root, there in Belle McGee's Belly-Up Saloon.

★

BIG GEORGE MCWHORTER, ruddy-faced, heavy-joweled, snake-eyed, had, at one time or another, been engaged in almost every manner of shady enterprise known to the Nebraska prairies. As a trader, he had sold whiskey and guns to the Indians; he had engaged in claim jumping. had been a land shark, dealing in false abstracts; he had promoted boom towns and peddled worthless lots.

He had no conscience or scruples, and, more than once, had found killing a convenient shortcut out of difficulties. And yet he had never even been close to a hang-noose, for he had hirelings ready to do his bidding.

Big George had holdings in New Babylon, which would continue to be valuable only so long as New Babylon remained the county seat. In Saint David he had invested money in saloons, and gambling halls. The whiskey was bad, the games were crooked, and the "take" was high.

Further, Mr. McWhorter had political ambitions. Hence he preferred to manage his affairs in Owlhoot Junction from the side lines. He owned an interest in the Hell's Delight, and here made his headquarters, with Rick Ringgold his lieutenant.

From the early Fifties, gangs of thieves had holed up along the Overland Trail. At first they had preyed on the wagon trains, but later turned their attention to stage coaches and steam trains.

Saint David, from the day it had been a tent city at railhead, had been a haven for many of these renegades, as they squandered their ill-gotten gains in Big George McWhorter's fleshpots. The town boss gave them protection, in return for which men like Seco Snyder, Alf Walker and others performed his little chores, including murder.

At election time they went to the polls, voting as Big George directed, with the result that the sheriff and many county officials were corrupt. Following the shooting of Maury Dines, Seco Snyder had surrendered to the law in New Babylon, a mere matter of formality. No one appeared to prefer charges, and the sheriff had no urge to mess around in Owlhoot Junction investigating so common a thing as a shooting scrape; so the doors of the local bastile were thrown open, and Mr. Snyder returned to his former haunts, pure as the driven snow.

He was in the Hell's Delight, catching up on the late gossip, including news of the arrival of the Parson in town, when the gent in question hove over the horizon.

Seco was prepared not to like the preacher, having been informed that the pious one had lambasted his name and reputation in the course of Maury Dines' funeral sermon.

Having been physically belted around by the Parson, Mr. Snyder liked him even less, and had vowed loudly that he would kill this elongated disciple the next time that he saw him. However, Big George ordered him to hold his horses, pending the initiation of the newly appointed marshal, Andy Pike.

When the Parson had not only properly lambasted the devil at the prayer meeting, but had violently thwarted Alf Walker's and Nick Dunn's attempts to hasten the demise of the new marshal, Big

George McWhorter became aware of his first vague stirring of uneasiness.

Apparently, they had a wildcat by the tail. Peal Ivy had been fighting for law and decency ever since the Union Pacific had given birth to the town, but his had been a small voice in the wilderness. Every time a few stout souls rallied around, Mr. McWhorter cracked the whip and these good men and true scrooched down in their pants in fear and trembling.

The Parson, however, didn't scrooch for shucks. On the other hand, he gave every indication of being a rampaging old sin-twister, and not at all averse to battling it out with man or the devil, from hell to breakfast.

Beside winning the confidence of the decent citizens, he was on his way to earning the grudging respect of a lot of hard-cases, men who admired courage in any man and had an inherent liking for fair play.

It was a feeble straw in the wind, and Big George had a feeling that unless the Parson was properly squelched—and soon—Owlhoot Junction was headed for a day of judgment. So he immediately formulated plans to settle the hash of the warring sky-pilot, once and for all.

★

SATURDAY morning found Saint David a-foam with conversation. There was talk of Parson Pickax, the new church movement and the pleasant memory of Alf Walker, gun-tough and bully, his claws clipped, gagging down Hostetter's Bitters.

There was, too, considerable speculation regarding the fitness of the new marshal. None could deny that Andy Pike possessed courage, but it had been all too evident that he lacked the ruthless, iron-fisted qualities necessary to his office, else he would have killed Alf Walker in his tracks when he had the chance.

The toughs, men said, would make short shrift of the young blacksmith. It was like leading a lamb to slaughter.

When Andy Pike fired up his forge and donned his leather apron, the sun was shining and the birds were singing, and the air was clean and sweet, but he was aware of none of this. Standing in the wide doorway of his shop, he saw only the utter ugliness of the sprawled buildings down Chadron Street.

Saint David, indeed! The town was a blot on the face of the earth; a dwelling place of ruffians. The cottonwoods were an insult to trees; the South Platte was a muddy imitation of a river; the prairie was a hateful expanse of nothing.

Andy thought of the town he had left back in Vermont, of the stately elms, of the green and friendly hills, of the white church spire there, of the majestic, tree-bordered Connecticut, and wondered why he had ever come west.

He thought of Maury Dines, gunned into the dirt. He thought of Nick Dunn and Alf Walker, making him look the fool before all of those people. He thought of Prudence Parmlee, so sweet and pretty, devoting herself to teaching a mess of brats, there in an old box car.

He loved her, and had dreamed of making a home for her, of having kids of his own. The sing-song patter of his hammer on the anvil had, to him, been the sound of carpenters driving nails in that new house he was planning.

But that had been yesterday. He had been a smithy then, strong and capable and well-thought-of. Today he was a dumb, slow-witted marshal, with a cheap tin star. He was alive, only by the grace of God and because a bony-shanked old freak, who called himself a parson, had unlimbered a shooting-iron, pulling his chestnuts out of the fire in the nick of time.

He must have been crazy, Andy told himself, to take the job in the first place. He had been busy shoeing that evil-tempered mule, and hadn't taken time seriously to consider what he was letting himself in for.

The funny part was that the thought that he might turn in his badge and quit never entered the head of Andy Pike this Saturday morning. He turned from his dour contemplation of those unpainted false fronts, thrust some irons into the fire and began to pump the bellows vigorously.

"By the great horn spoon!" he cried suddenly to the empty shop. "Who am I to show the white feather? My forebears cleared the forests of New England, with

an ax in one hand and a gun in the other. They went armed to church, and neither the savages nor the red-coats were able to turn them from their purpose of living as free men."

"Well-spoken, my young friend!" a voice called from the broad-arched door.

It was Parson Pickax. Prudence Parmlee stood beside him. Andy thought he had never seen her looking so vividly radiant.

"Bravo!" exclaimed the girl. "A mighty man, the village blacksmith!"

Andy regarded them sheepishly. "By golly," he said, blushing, "you gave me a start."

"Behold, I have created the smith," intoned the Parson, "that bloweth the coals in the fire, and that bringeth forth an instrument for his work; and I have created the waster to destroy."

"By golly, does it say that in the Bible?" said Andy.

"Isaiah, fifty-four; sixteen, are the tally numbers."

"By golly!"

★

PRUDENCE PARMLEE said, "The Parson is looking for a job, Andy. I told him you said you needed a helper, particularly on Saturday when so many settlers bring in their teams to be shod, and have other blacksmithing done."

"I need a helper all right," said Andy, "'specially since I took up with this marshal job." There was a twinkle in his blue eyes like the glimmer of sun on a lake. "The Parson comes real well recommended."

"I labor for modest wages," said the Parson, "for my needs are few."

"Don't you get any pay for bein' a minister?" asked Andy.

"No," said the Parson, "not bein' a circuit rider, an' it would be unfair to ask my little flock to support me in idleness. I am healthy and able, an' honest toil is good for any man."

"By golly," said Andy, "you just peel out of that coat. You'll find a leather apron hangin' on the peg in the corner there."

While the Parson prepared to go to work, Andy went to the door with Prudence. Off to the south a smudge of trail dust lifted against the horizon.

"Another trail herd," said Andy. "A lot of Texas cattle are comin' to Nebraska. One day this will be a great range country."

"As soon as the cattle are on the bedground at the river," the girl said, "those Texans will come whooping and ki-yipping into Saint David. I wish their folks had taught them better manners."

The Parson came forward, an incongruous spectacle in his high hat and leather apron, his sleeves rolled past his bony elbows. "'There will be cattle on a thousand hills'," said he, quoting from the fiftieth Psalm. "A man named Asaph writ' it, an', dollars to doughnuts, he had a vision of the Chisholm Trail."

"Guess I'll have my work cut out tonight," Andy said, running his fingers through his great mop of yellow hair. "Cowboys are tough, by golly."

"Yuh can't hooraw a Texan none," said the Parson, "but, man to man, he'll give an' take with yuh, for fun, money or eyeballs."

"I hate them!" the girl cried. "They're drunken bullies."

"It wa'n't cowboys that give Owlhoot Junction its name," the Parson reminded her. "They do honest work; they're not thieves an' murderers. They like to blow off steam when they git to town, but mostly they're jist full of paw an' beller."

"The Parson's right," said Andy. "McWhorter's toughs are the ones we have to fear." He went on, "Rustlers have been stampedin' an' runnin' off cattle. The drovers blame it on the settlers, but more likely it's Seco Snyder an' his crowd. An' then the saloons an' gamblin' halls rob the cowboys right an' left, which makes for a sight o' hard feelin'."

"Shorely," said the Parson. "Bound to." He waxed thoughtful then, eyes on the distant dust cloud. At length, he said, "The cattle trails are p'intin' north. Saint David is goin' to be a big cow town, like Dodge an' Caldwell was, down in Kansas."

The Parson rubbed his hard-calloused palms. "Next to bein' on the railroad, give me a trail town, with hell a-smokin'. Then give me a marshal, brawny an'

tough, an' a few God-fearin' souls, an' a few sinners. An', by the seven-toed prophets, I'll give yuh a goin' town fitten for all o' God's children—with a church spire a-p'intin' straight to heaven."

Prudence Parmlee stared at this strange Parson, and was caught by his pioneering enthusiasm. Then she looked at Andy Pike, starry-eyed. They three represented the things on which this new frontier was founded—a church, a school and a lawman's star. They were building for a future generation.

"You're right, Parson!" she cried. "One day Saint David will be a good place to live in."

"Then we'll laugh about the wild days," said Andy Pike, hooking his thumbs in the armpits of his vest and swelling out his chest, "an' we'll tell our children how their maw an' paw tamed the West, by golly! Shucks, if we had it easy now, we wouldn't have a durned thing worth talkin' about when we're old."

And he kissed her, right there in front of the Parson.

Parson Pickax proved to be a right handy man around a blacksmith shop. Men of the plains had need to know many trades, and the parson was no exception. Too, he was strong and willing.

They made a strange pair—Andy Pike, blond, square-built, big-muscled; and the Parson, his scarecrow figure enveloped in that flapping leather apron.

There were the usual hangers-on, together with cowboys from the trail herds held at the river. Lean and bronzed, they were, these Texans, bringing their wants and their Texas drawl to the Yankee blacksmith shop in Saint David. A chuck-wagon was needing a wagon tire shrunk on and a new doubletree. There were horses to be shod; small jobs of smithing.

Some of the cowboys had been at Belle McGee's the night before, and they joshed the Parson about his six-shooter religion, but he was always ready with an answer.

"It's all in the Book," he told them.

"Yuh mean it tells in the Bible about shootin'?" said a lank puncher.

"For sartin," declared the Parson. "Things back in them times was like in Owlhoot Junction now. Jist look at the sixty-fourth Psalm. It says, 'They encourage themselves in evil . . . they lay snares. . . . But God will shoot them, an' they shall be wounded, an' light a shuck."

The Texan grinned, shook his head. "Yuh got a job to tame this town."

Between shoeing horses and oxen, sharpening plowshares, bending and shaping hot iron and fitting spokes to wagon wheels, the Parson, from time to time, spoke of wild times on the Union Pacific and hell-roaring nights in Julesburg. Cheyenne and other towns at railhead. He expounded sixgun lore and told of tough gents who took departure from this mortal vale with their boots on.

"What are yore ideas on killin', Parson?" asked a Texan.

"I'm ag'in' it," said the Parson solemnly. "When a gent waxes too simultaneous, I jist favor shootin' 'im in the right eye, which disturbs his aim."

Big George McWhorter had come along Chadron Street with a man named Pete McCoy, a card-sharp and gun-slick. They stopped to join the loungers in front of the blacksmith shop, unaware that the Parson had taken employment there.

At the sound of that familiar deep-toned voice within, McWhorter stiffened. His hatred of the preacher had become an obsession that goaded him relentlessly. His eye hit at the ungainly figure, poised at the anvil to strike at a redhot iron held by Andy Pike, and his lids pinched down.

"Still shootin' off your mouth, I see," boomed McWhorter.

"I shoot other things beside my mouth," said the Parson, casting a glance at the pair outside of the broad-arched door.

"They buried a man here the other day, who popped off out of turn," said Pete McCoy maliciously. "You might be next, who knows?"

The Parson had never seen this man before, but he knew the breed, and it was enough that he was with the town boss of Owlhoot Junction. Still standing with his sledge cocked, Parson Pickax gave them his attention, while the iron on the anvil dulled, lost its cherry red.

MANY times the Parson had walked hand in hand with death, and he sensed its spectre, hovering like a dark shadow there now. It

leered from behind the slitted lids of Big George McWhorter; it glinted with cruel intensity in the eyes of his sleek-dressed companion.

This wasp-waisted, bleak-faced man with Big George had flung his threat, and it left the Parson no alternative but to challenge the remark. That, or be branded a quitter before these Texas men and the loungers.

No gun was in evidence on either McWhorter or his companion, but that they were armed there was no doubt in the mind of the Parson. Men of their ilk were like to pack sneakguns.

Slowly the Parson put down his sledge, and walked to the place where he had hung his coat and holstered Colt. He buckled the scuffed gun-belt about him over the leather apron, and went then to stand watchfully in the threshold of the shop.

"As you were sayin'," said the Parson, resting his faded blue orbs on the man who was called Pete McCoy. "About this gentleman who popped off. I take it, yuh refer to the late marshal, a kindly an' honorable citizen, I am told. I pop, right considerable—you weasel-eyed, snake-crawlin', prairie rat!"

Pete McCoy smiled wickedly—and waited, his slim, lady-white hands clasped in front of him. "That's fightin' talk, my friend."

"Shore is," said the Parson. "An' if yuh got openers—have at it!"

Pete McCoy's right hand darted with lightning speed just inside of his left sleeve, where a derringer nestled in a special-made holster.

Startled faces watched. Andy Pike gasped, "By golly!"

It seemed that never in the world could Parson Pickax clear the enormously long barrel of his old Walker Colt in time to compete fairly with the gun-fanged killer before him, but already he was in action.

The Parson drew and fired in one fast, smooth motion. For so awkward-looking a man, he showed incredulous speed. The tight bark of the derringer was swallowed by the tremendous bellow of the jerking .44.

Pete McCoy's shot was wide of the target, for the reason that his aim had been disturbed by the slug that slapped him fair in the right eye.

The gunman wilted, fell forward. Big George McWhorter, his ruddy features turned chalky, gulped a startled oath, shuddered at the sound Pete McCoy made when he hit the ground and hastily backed away from the inquiring eye of the preacher,

"Lord," said the Parson, holstering his gun, "here's a pore, repentant sinner a-gittin' on the train."

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell-Town Invitation

OWLHOOT JUNCTION was shocked, stunned. The toughs and decent citizens alike stood aghast. This was sixgun redemption with a vengeance. No doubt now of the Parson's courage, or of his fighting ability.

A Texan in the Belly-Up Saloon said, "I don't sabe what brand of religion that old gospel-shouter ramrods, but if I lived in this man's bailiwick I'd git in the fold."

There were those in Saint David who now were for publicly declaring themselves on the side of Peal Ivy and the Parson in the fight for law and order. Many, however, thought the Reverend was not long for this world, for Big George McWhorter had left the scene of the shooting, foaming oaths and threatening to send the Parson to hell a-fluking.

Peal Ivy took new courage, and dashed off some redhot copy for the next week's issue of the *Blade*.

The towers of Babylon were tottering. The county seat fight was half won. All rightful thinking citizens were behind the preacher. Owlhoot Junction was due for a clean-up, even if it took a vigilance committee to do it. A few hangings in Nemaha, Nebraska, he wrote, had discouraged thieves and hard-cases.

Doc Byler said the thing that had happened might take the pressure off the new marshal, Andy Pike, for a little, but that the roughs would be out for revenge.

Rick Ringgold lamented the death of Pete McCoy solely for the reason that he had lost the services of a top card-slick. Seco Snyder and some of the others saw

in the killing a prediction of disaster for the gun-slinger foolhardy enough to brace the Parson's game head-on.

Alf Walker, his smashed right hand an aching reminder of his recent encounter with the Parson, considered himself lucky to have escaped being a one-eyed corpse.

Great as was the furor caused by the shooting of Pete McCoy, there was not one in Saint David to express genuine sorrow over his death.

Almost before the body of Pete McCoy was cold, Big George McWhorter was shaping a plan for the removal of Parson Pickax. Already the Parson's flaming lamp had burned too brightly and too long.

To a man of Mr. McWhorter's accomplishments, extinguishing the Parson's light presented no great problem. It merely meant a little scheming, plus a few guns in the right place at the right moment. . . .

* * *

Saturday night in Owlhoot Junction was a time when men died handily. They died on the turn of a card, because of the fickle whims of a spangled lady, because their bellies were full of red-eye and their heads were full of butterflies.

Cowboys, miners, freighters, honyaks, Saturday night was their night to howl. Rustlers, road agents and slickers, they jammed the saloons and gambling halls; they overflowed to gallery and sidewalk—the joyful, the quarrelsome, and the taciturn.

Children, women and dogs stayed off Chadron Street, on Saturday night.

Parson Pickax, a hard day's work done and a dollar earned, relaxed in sprawled comfort on the gallery of the boarding house of Launcelot Jenks and meditated on tomorrow's sermon.

At the end of Chadron Street, where deep shadows lay, Andy Pike and Prudence Parmlee stood, thinking, for the moment of nothing but each other. There was the smell of coolness on the earth, the whispering of wind in the prarie grass. Star dust sprinkled the sky.

Yonder a light glimmered from the window of a sod house. Close by cottonwoods rustled their skirts.

Down Chadron Street a fiddle squeaked. The piano in Belle McGee's place was banging out its tin-pan harmony. There was the galloping rhythm of a hurdy-gurdy. Came the sounds of shrill laughter, of harsh-pitched voices, with now and then a drunken howl.

Neither Andy Pike nor the girl heard these things, or remembered the killing at the blacksmith shop. They lived in these moments in a world that was no part of Owlhoot Junction. Theirs was a small and wonderful heaven, here in the night of the Nebraska prairie, the heaven that lovers know.

And Andy kissed her—the soft, tender kiss of an awkward, bashful sweetheart. . . .

The shot came from the direction of the Hell's Delight Saloon. Brief and hard was the sound it made—a brutal reminder that this was Owlhoot Junction, the town that boasted that it knew no law and no God.

A grimness was suddenly carved on the face of Andy Pike. His hand slid from the girl's waist to his gun-belt. Prudence uttered a small, frightened sound.

"Oh, Andy!" Her pale face was like marble in the night.

Twice had Andy Pike made his rounds, down one side of Chadron Street and up the other. There had been the friendly greeting of acquaintances; some had joked with him about his new job; there had been a few sullen stares.

This last time, Prudence had come from the boarding house to walk with him to the edge of town.

"By golly," said Andy, "I've got to go see what's up."

The girl was afraid, but her voice was steady now. "Yes," she said, "that's your duty." After all, they had faced hardships and death on the trail, and they must go on, as bravely as they had come, until this frontier was settled up and safe for those who would come after.

Prudence Parmlee walked with Andy as far as the boarding house. From there he went on alone. . . .

★

THEY called it Dead Man's Alley. Other towns had had their Dead Man's Alley, but none had been so bloodstained as this dark-walled gulch.

On the one side it was bounded by the Hell's Delight, and on the other by a long, rambling building containing a honkytonk and gambling hall. Doors from both the saloon and honkytonk opened into the alley. These provided handy exits when bouncers tossed out troublesome gents. Fist-fights were frequent in the alley, and often there was gun-play that ended up in new occupants for boothill.

The pistol shot that attracted the attention of Andy Pike had come from Dead Man's Alley.

A short time before, Big George McWhorter had gathered certain of his henchmen around him in a back room of the Hell's Delight. A jug and glasses were on the table, and whiskey flowed freely.

Seco Snyder, Nick Dunn, Alf Walker and several others were there. McWhorter, thumbs hooked in the armpits of his vest, was backed against the wall, puffing at a big black cigar.

"You're a hell of a pair of gunslingers," Big George snarled, looking at Seco and Alf. "That damned parson made monkeys out of both of you."

"He made a corpse out of Pete McCoy," said Alf Walker. "A helluva lookin' one, too, if yuh ask me."

"You had plenty chance to paunch 'im," Seco Snyder said sulkily, "when he gunned Pete."

Shut up!" thundered Big George. "An' stay shut. I'll do the talkin'. Tonight we're goin' to kill two birds with one stone, an' in the mornin' this psalmsingin' old badger is goin' to be camped on the doorstep of hell, along with Andy Pike."

"Simple as that," said Nick Dunn, with a crooked grin.

"There will be a pistol shot out here in the alley," said Big George. "That's to suck in the marshal. He's made a couple of rounds, and he won't be far off. Rick will be on the lookout for him, and he's goin' to say one of them riders from down in the Skillet killed a man in here. Rick's goin' to point him out.

"It ain't in the craw of a Texas man to to take any guff from a blue-bellied abolitionist. When this Yank marshal tries to arrest the man Rick says did the shootin', guns are goin' to start blastin'.

"You boys circulate around in the crowd. Keep an eye out for the Parson. He sided the new marshal in Belle McGee's last night, and I look for him to buy into this game. When he does, let him have it."

Seco Snyder nodded, fortified himself with another slug of red-eye. "I'll fog the old buzzard to a cinder," he said thickly. "Cracked me on the skull with my own sixgun. I never did git it back."

Big George McWhorter went into the main saloon then, and gave Rick Ringgold the nod. The proprietor of the Hell's Delight spoke to a rheumy-eyed hangeron. This man eased out of the side door into Dead Man's Alley, and a moment later the sound of a shot ripped the night. . . .

Parson Pickax liked peace and quiet. He liked to sit and dream, and watch the moon silver the prairie. He could see it shinin' on the spire of Saint David's new church this blessed minute.

"Yes; the church he was a-goin' to build here in Owlhoot Junction would have a steeple, a-pointin' the way to Glory. There would be benches an' a real pulpit an' a hay-burner stove. There might even be a melodeon with treadles.

There would be buryin's in this church, an' baptizin', an' marryin', an' singin' of a Sabbath morn. Yuh take that yallerhaired blacksmith now, Andy Pike, an' the schoolma'm, with her dimples an' her freckles an' her uppity nose—like as not they'd be the first couple j'ined in the holy bonds o' wedlock in this here meetin'-house. . . .

Then the sound of a shot stopped the Parson's daydreams cold. He scowled at the lights down Chadron Street; then erected himself like a sooky old steer getting up to look for boogers.

"A hell-born town," said the parson. He went into the house and buckled on his gun-belt. When he came out, Prudence Parmlee was standing by the steps, her hands clasped against her breast, staring after Andy Pike.

"You'll look out for him, Parson?" she said, anxiously.

"Th' Almighty looks after his own," said Parson Pickax. And he went along the plank sidewalk in great strides.

Rick Ringgold, sleek as a snake, stood outside of the Hell's Delight, his hard,

narrow features set with a look of craft.

The blocky bulk of Andy Pike appeared, the marshal's star glinting.

Rick Ringgold purred, "Ah, there you are, Marshal. I was lookin' for you. A little trouble in the back room. One of them Texans killed a man. Come along; I'll point him out."

"A lyin' man is an abomination in the sight of the Lord!" boomed a voice close behind Andy Pike.

Rick Ringgold jerked around, and saw there the towering form of Parson Pickax. Hatless, he was, with the light from the door shining on his high, bald dome.

"That shot never come from inside four walls," cried the Parson. "It was fired from outside."

"You're a liar!" snarled Ringgold.

The Parson instantly swung a gnarled, ham-size fist, which popped against the jaw of the proprietor of the Hell's Delight with a sound like that of a gourd dropped on a rock. Ringgold swayed, started to fall, but before he hit the planking, the Parson seized him and pitched him through the saloon doors.

At that instant the black mouth of Dead Man's Alley blossomed with muzzle-flame, and a slug creased the Parson's bony ribs. Another gun howled, and death crooned past the ear of Andy Pike.

The suddenness of this leaden tempest confused the young blacksmith.

It was the voice of the Parson that whipped him into action. Strike while the iron's hot, my son! Th' day o' judgment's at hand!"

ANDY PIKE lowered his head and charged into the Hell's Delight. Partly he was motivated by the instinct to dodge the lead screaming from the alley, but more by righteous wrath because of the trap that had been set.

Baldy Johnson, his nose held in shape by strips of courtplaster, hung over the bar, his jaw agape. Everything had been set to shuffle the marshal and the Parson off to boothill, but something had miscued.

Here came his boss, Rick Ringgold, head-first through the batwing doors; and here came this young blacksmith, built like a bull buffalo, his huge fists swinging.

Big George McWhorter was standing at one end of the bar, the lord-mayor of Owlhoot Junction, all primed to enjoy the sight of a pair of festering disciples of law and order getting bludgeoned down by hot lead. His face turned pale.

Guns were slugging it out in Dead Man's Alley. Chadron Street was coming to a boil. A wild bullet hit a horse at a hitch-rail, and the animal went down screaming. Other snorting, plunging ponies jerked free.

Except for the gay melody of a hurdy-gurdy, a stunned hush briefly gripped the Hell's Delight; then there was bedlam. The shrieks of spangled ladies mingled with the yells and curses of men. Tables were upended; cards, chips and whiskey glasses were spilled in all directions.

Andy Pike knew little of gun-slinging as an art, and his holstered Colt sagged forgotten at his hip. His was a trade that called for muscle and brawn and the use of stout hands. These things he employed now.

He saw a man wrenching at a six-shooter, and he seized an overturned table and with it cut a swath that not only mowed down the gunman but all in his path. He snatched up a chair, and found only one fragment in his grip after he had brought it down on the head of a hulking rough who tried to close with him.

Seco Snyder, bully and killer, took a half-crouch at the far end of the long bar, waiting his chance to blast Andy Pike.

In Dead Man's Alley, Parson Pickax had gone into action with his old cap-and-ball Walker Colt. Six bullets he had to spend, no more, for it took a week to load one of these guns. But the Parson had always contended that six shots were a-plenty in any fight, his notion being that the gent who failed to down his opponents after thumbing the hammer six times was a dead man, anyway.

Alf Walker was there in the alley, shooting left-handed. He missed the Parson in two tries, and then went up the flume with a lead package in his belly. Nick Dunn had too much red-eye aboard to be at his nimble best. More, once bullet-burned, Parson Pickax was on the peck.

Four unhatched hunks of lead nested in the chambers of the Walker-gun when the Parson popped through the side door of the Hell's Delight and presented his

credentials at the portals of this, the devil's own rendezvous.

Rick Ringgold's place had been the scene of a lot of hectic brawls, but never one with the promise of a harvest like this. Men of the wolf-breed were rallying under the command of the fury-choked voice of Big George McWhorter.

All law they feared and hated—the law represented by the shiny star on the vest of this tawny blacksmith, Andy Pike.

The leathery-faced Texans seemed to sense that this was a grudge battle between local factions and called for no meddling by outsiders; hence they remained aloof, content to have a grandstand seat for the show. Too, they admired courage, and the sight of the young blacksmith taking on all comers with his two bare hands was something for the book.

Big George McWhorter jumped behind the bar and grabbed a sawed-off shotgun from a shelf under the counter. Baldy Johnson came up with a .45. A Bowie knife flashed in the hand of a big bouncer. Rick Ringgold crawled to the wall and staggered to his feet, a snub-nosed derringer gripped in his hand.

Seco Snyder saw his chance now, and drove a bullet at Andy Pike. The impact half turned the smithy around, but it didn't drop him. A knife whistled through the air. The yellow haired young giant threw up his arm, stopping the blade.

With the knife still in his arm and his shirt reddening, Andy flung himself at his nearest antagonist, his six-shooter still unholstered. With his bare hands, he picked up the man and crashed him down across the bar, breaking his back.

Seco Snyder snarled a curse, and again eared back the hammer of his six-shooter. In that instant, the black-frocked Parson burst through the door that opened on Dead Man's Alley. . . .

The hurdy-gurdy against the back wall was still grinding out music, a gay refrain for red death's parade.

Big George McWhorter, fingers crooked against the triggers of the double-barreled shotgun, saw the Parson. He saw more, for he saw Pete McCoy, with a crimsoned hole where an eye had been, kneel-

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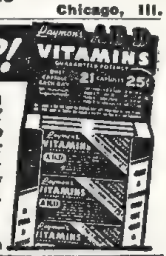

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ing slowly in eternal reparation for his sins, there in the dirt in front of the blacksmith's shop.

Parson Pickax had found Jordan a hard road to travel, a road where only fighting men stood the ghost of a show. This was the toughest saloon in the toughest cow town of the new cattle trail to the north. Here there were only the quick and the dead.

Parson Pickax, looking through the gauzy banners of smoke, saw that the time was short. Seco Snyder was readying to throw a second shot at Andy Pike, bloodied but still fighting. The guns of Baldy Johnson and Rick Ringgold were spurting flame.

Big George McWhorter was crouched behind the bar, with only his flat-crowned hat and his evil eyes showing above the twin-muzzles of his murderous little weapon.

The Parson, his bony shanks spraddled, steadied to the task of converting sinners. The battle-scarred old Walker shouted, and Seco Snyder, the fruits of a misspent life ripening fast, swayed against the end of the bar, his six-shooter oozing from his fingers.

The Walker swung then and laid its frowning eye on Big George. With the trigger pressed home, the Parson loosed the long hammer-piece under his thumb. The bullet took McWhorter in the center of the skull.

Both barrels of the shotgun vomited buckshot, but already Big George was sliding over the brink and the twin charge only tore a gaping wound in the ceiling.

Rick Ringgold dropped the derringer and threw up his hands. Baldy Johnson burrowed behind the bar, content to still be alive.

That night the Hell's Delight Saloon stood as a tombstone over the grave of Owlhoot Junction. The fight for the county seat was done, long before an election ballot was cast. A town, men said, with a marshal like Andy Pike and a preacher like Parson Pickax was likely to be a decent place to live in.

Anyway, Saint David was on the Union Pacific, and, as the Parson said, all trains stopped there, including the Glory Train.

ANDY PIKE had a close call, and for a time it seemed that he'd never survive his several bullet wounds. But he was rugged and tough, with the vitality, Doc Byler said, of a Texas longhorn.

Further, the whole town was praying for him, and, with Prudence Parmlee for a nurse—well, as Belle McGee put it, it would have been "durn ungrateful of him to up an' kick the bucket."

Parson Pickax did the blacksmithing during those weeks that Andy was laid up, and managed very well.

Rick Ringgold and Baldy Johnson, along with most of the hard-cases, quit town. Folks cleaned out the Hell's Delight and put in some benches, and held services there through that first winter.

When the frost was out of the ground in the spring, work was begun on the new church. Too, a suitable school was built, and a court house. And Saint David was on the way to becoming a thriving town.

Trail herds moved north in increasing numbers, and cowboys whooped it up in town, but there was law and order now, and a deadline, which separated the sheep and the goats, as it were.

Andy Pike continued as marshal until the court house was finished, and the new sheriff had established himself in Saint David.

Peal Ivy strutted and bragged until folks could hardly stand him. Beside being a deacon in the church now, he claimed credit for having sent for Parson Pickax, and said the *Blade* had helped kick the devil to hell out of Saint David.

Andy and Prudence were married that summer. The ceremony took place on the steps of the new church, with the whole town looking on. Belle McGee said it couldn't have been a bigger crowd if it had been a hanging.

The Parson kissed the bride, and the bride kissed Andy, who blushed and said, "By golly!"

Down the years the first thing the traveler saw upon approaching the town of Saint David, there in western Nebraska, was the white spire of the church that Parson Pickax built, pointing like a finger straight up the Glory Trail. . . .

THE END

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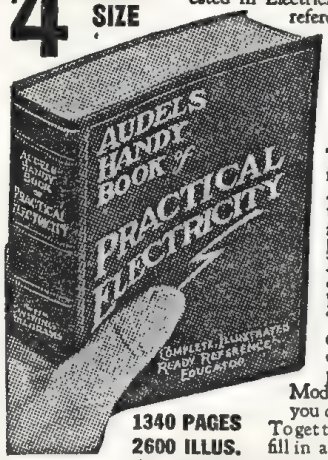

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★ UP THE TRAIL ★

RECENTLY we received a letter from one of our readers, C. E. Newkirk, of De Ridder, La., hauling us over the coals because he believes that fiction, both in books and magazines, generally fails to give a true picture of Western life. He says, in part:

Being born in Western Colorado, having lived on a ranch most of my thirty-five years and having grown up around horses and cattle, it irks me to see how . . . authors portray Western history and ranch life . . . making it look like every other man in Western history was a blood-thirsty gunman or a rustler. . . .

Why don't some of the authors write . . . stories of the regular routine of ranch life—round-ups, breaking horses, the hard winters and the taking care of stock during those times, putting up the hay, deer and elk hunting, fall round-up and taking cattle to the shipping points—all without ten or fifteen men getting slaughtered every time a gunman comes to town. . . ?

Well, Mr. Newkirk, we want to thank you for your honest, straightforward opinion. And we're glad to have this chance to answer it here.

To begin with, *Star Western* is a magazine with one purpose—to print the kind of entertaining, colorful fiction that evokes some of reckless and vigorous flavor of the West at its most dramatic stage of development.

From the time of the lusty, buckskin trappers, up to the turn of the century, there were many remote localities where men lived, worked and slept with death never far away. You have only to study the history of pioneer Texas, for example, to realize that those first ranchers, beside having to depend upon themselves for everything from food and light their own entertainment, usually lived in constant dread of Indian massacres. It is estimated that up to the middle '70's Indian attacks had cost close to thirty million dollars in property destroyed, and had taken uncounted lives of men, women and children.

Along the gold frontier—from the brawling boom-camps of the Pacific coast to Virginia City and eastward to the Montana early Colorado camps, men also lived dangerously. Life was painted in its raw, primitive colors and struggle and conflict was its salt.

Following the War between the States, with the expansion of the cattle industry, the range and trail were marked by deeds of quiet heroism, and by sharp, dramatic flare-ups that echoed to the sharp crash of gunfire. There were several causes for this: the introduction of barbed wire; the reaching out for new grazing land to accommodate stock increase; a sudden sharp rise in the price of cattle which would at once start an epidemic of rustling; and local feuds. The Fence-Cutter's War, down in Texas; the bloody Tonto Basin War of Arizona, the complicated causes that resulted in the Johnston County "Invasion," to name but a few, carry with them the life-blood of good drama, which is always based on conflict of human will.

We agree with Mr. Newkirk, that in ranch life—especially in more civilized localities and in a later period—guns did not play a major part. And we have printed many a good story, written by men who have been born and brought up on cattle ranches, that tell of the details of ranch life—exactly the things that Mr. Newkirk mentions. We will publish more.

But you see, most of these stories tell of the Old West—a vast empire that was enduring its growing pains. At that time, formal law was often a long distance away, and a man had to stand up on his two hind legs and fight for his rights, with the tools at hand.

It was a period of violence, of man-to-man struggle. And—fortunately or not—since the days when men lived in caves and carved their accounts of heroic deeds upon stone, these sagas, based on history, have been chiefly concerned with the life-and-death struggle, where men fought courageously against overpowering odds.

We believe in the West, in the frontier men and women who wouldn't scare, and who spent generously of their blood to build the kind of land they wanted. And we're going to continue to publish, each month, stories which, if even in a small way, help to "Bring the Old West Back to Life!"

(Continued from page 6)

herds, and make the long drive to his home ranges, paying for such cattle after delivery.

Whether or not it is true, as some of those Texas cattlemen claimed, that his bookkeeping was sort of hit-or-miss, some dispute arose about payments for the Texas cattle.

Suit was started by one of the Texas cattlemen claiming non-payment for cattle that Chisum had transferred to New Mexico. Papers were served, feeling ran high, and Chisum himself, the King of the Pecos, for a short while rested in jail—until he produced from its metal tube the powers-of-attorney signed by the very men who were suing him. That released him from durance vile, but it didn't stop his troubles.

Now we have to go back some years —before the Civil War, in fact, when Chisum was member of an ill-starred Fort Smith pioneer packing firm. It was his job to buy up beef from the ranchers and ship it north. Owing to lack of refrigeration facilities, much of the meat spoiled; the firm failed for about $100,000, secured by notes signed by the two pardners and Chisum. Later on an attempt was made to collect from Chisum by the ranchers, since he was the only member of the firm who had not gone into bankruptcy. He refused to pay, claiming the statute of limitations, and also that his only assets at the time were worthless brush cattle. The notes remained in the hands of the irate ranchers, being used perhaps, for wallpaper, along with whatever other worthless securities they had.

Fifteen years or so passed; that episode of Chisum's life was more or less forgotten. But a shrewd commission merchant, Robert Hunter, remembered. Quietly he left Kansas City and headed south into Texas. He made the rounds of the ranchers still holding Chisum's notes for the defunct packing company, and started collecting them, like people collect postage stamps, paying ten cents on the dollar.

People thought he was crazy, for if there had been any way of getting at Chisum, since he had risen to riches,

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those cowmen believed that they would have done so long before. Quietly, Hunter returned to his Dodge City branch, and started to speed up the machinery for the great cattle-raid.

In 1876, a Dodge City newspaper published a routine item saying that Hunter and fifty cowboys were leaving for the Pecos prepared to drive back a herd of twenty-thousand cattle which were to be purchased from Chisum. It was customary for such men at that time to be well armed on their journey against Indian attack, and the forays of rustlers. But Hunter must have been expecting plenty of trouble, for each of his men had a reputation as a gun-fighter and tough-hand.

Chisum was very happy to sell his twenty thousand head at the price agreed upon, which would net him a good profit. After the work of gathering the herd, it was finally headed north. But before Hunter left, he retained Tom Catron as his attorney.

A few days later, Chisum and Hunter rode into Las Vegas to complete the deal. There, in the lawyer's office, Hunter produced a battered satchel.

"Here's the dinero, Chisum," he said, as Chisum slid the signed bill of sale across to him. "It's been a good deal, and nice knowing you!"

Yes, it had been a good deal—for Hunter. For in that battered satchel were all the notes that Chisum had forgotten about—but which Hunter had not!

My grandfather never told me just what "Uncle John" Chisum said when he opened the satchel. Maybe it was because at that time my grandfather had gotten religion and had mostly cut out cussing, unless he got mad.

Maybe old John Chisum was mad at himself, for he was one of the few cowmen at that time who never packed a gun. Or maybe it was because he knew that the Jingle Bob hands he might have mustered to pursue his herd, wouldn't stand much chance against fifty case-hardened gun-fighters that Hunter had collected to make the drive.

Hunter, however, continued to play it safe. It was said that he made the

drive in almost record time, and didn't worry about the herd losing tallow on the way. And at Dodge, the cattle were shipped, not to Kansas City but to Chicago, to put plenty distance between them and the King of the Pecos.

That is supposed to be one of the biggest cattle-rustles in history. The weight of the law was against Chisum, who later denied that he had been legally rustled, and claimed that he fully understood the agreement all the time. But the chances are that if the walls of Tom Catron's office could talk, they'd tell a far different story.

Thank you, Bob O'Shea. Chisum, you remember, lived on as a cattle-king, to take part in the famous Lincoln County War, in which Billy the Kid carved notches in the gunsmoke hall of fame, *The Big Wind.*

And a final note from George Beckwith, of El Paso:

Dear Strawboss:

Do you ever run any of the stories called "tall tales?" To me, and I know to many others, they are amusing—but more than that, they are of the warp and woof of our frontier. And that there's an interest in them is shown by the fact that many small cities around the country still have their "Liars' Clubs," which, I understand, hold a national convention every so often. Why not ask your Branding Corral bunch to write up some of the tall tales they have heard?

Strikes us as a good idea, Mr. Beckwith, and we'll let you know about it in the next issue.

Until then—*salud y pesetas!*

—STRAWBOSS

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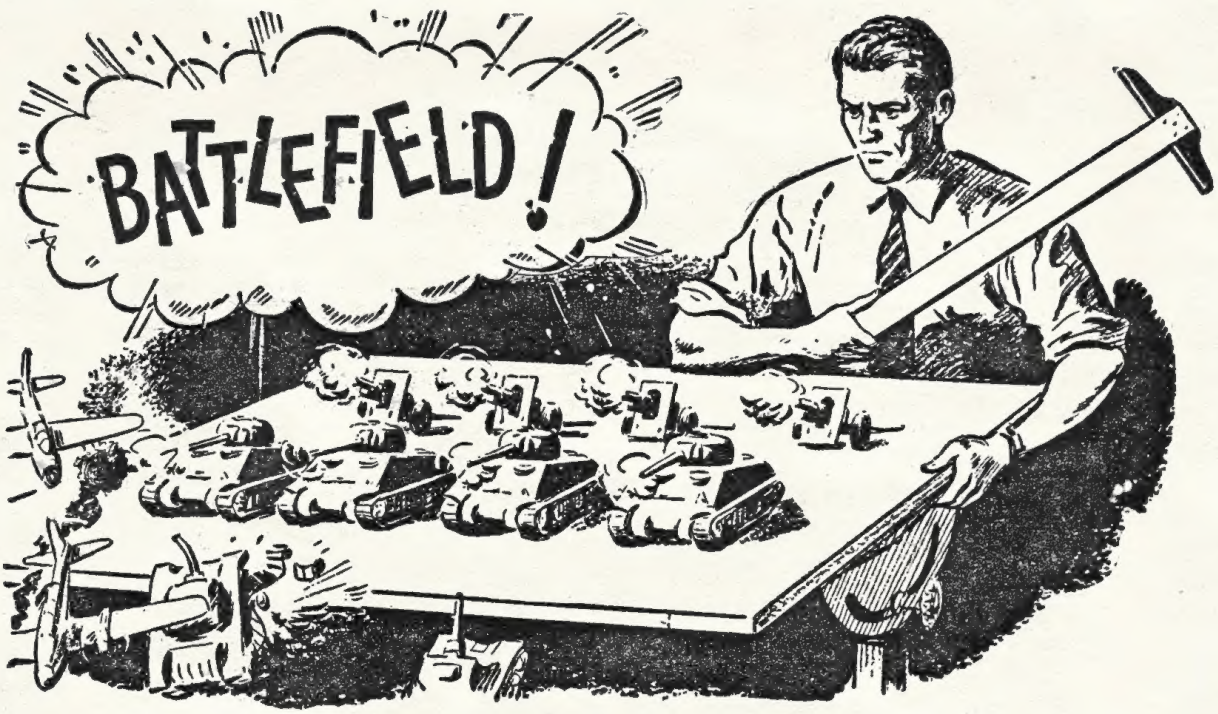

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